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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NO PLACE LIKE HOME: CONVERSATIONS WITH WESTERN CANADIAN WOMEN WRITING FOR THE THEATRE

BY

©

LISE ANN JOHNSON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 1992

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Mary Blackstone

Jan Selman

Carl Hare

Diane Bessai

05 October 1992

Abstract

This thesis collects conversations with eleven Western Canadian women who write for the theatre: Joan MacLeod, Joanna Glass, Pamela Boyd, Maureen Hunter, Connie Gault, Barbara Sapergia, Conni Massing, Peggy Thompson, Beverley Simons, Sharon Stearns, and Patricia Ludwick. The interviews explore how gender and region have shaped their experience of writing for the theatre, including their process of writing, their understanding of their audience, and their relationship to the theatre community. The conversations also examine each writer's thoughts on processes of play development and on their work. The women have different backgrounds, different goals and live in different parts of the Western provinces as well as Toronto. The collection offers the reader a glimpse of each writer in their milieu. The critical introduction preceding the collection focuses on the impact "real" and "imaginative" geography has on a playwright's experience, perspective, identity, imagination, writing process, writing and reception of their work. Although geography has renewed significance in linking artists and audiences in a globalized world, many of these playwrights, faced with Central Canadian biases in the criticism and production of their work, down-play both their regional background and their gender in an effort to reach a broader market.

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Introduction

In a land as vast as Canada, geography has always held and continues to hold great significance for the Canadian theatre. In our current times of globalization, when cultures are in danger of becoming "dislocated" by universal software broadcast over high-tech airwaves, geography takes on renewed significance. Indeed, without a supportive relationship to geography, a writer can also become "dislocated". Both imaginative geography, belonging to the memory and the imagination, and real geography, related to the continuing social and physical make-up of a place, have enormous impact on a playwright's experience, perspective, identity, imagination, writing process, and the content, style and reception of their work. In Western Canada, where artists face Central Canadian biases in the criticism, judgment and marketing of their work, geography, depending on one's perspective, can either root or limit a play. For many Western Canadian women artists, gender and geography form a double margin around them in our country's cultural map. Consequently, in an effort to assert their own individuality and the universality of their writing, many of the women playwrights who are represented in this collection down-play both their regional background and their gender. This response is created by both Central Canadian biases informing much of Canadian theatre and Canadian theatre criticism, and by methods of theatrical production which create a gap between playwrights and their audiences.

In his book *Producing Marginality*, Robert Wallace addresses this gap, and at the same time, is ultimately biased by a narrow Toronto-centric perspective. He makes an "urgent" plea for "a new or at least renewed vision of theatre in Canada."[1] and suggests that English Canadian theatre has not responded to the changing nature and the changing needs of our population. Given the multiple perspectives that exist in our post-modern times, Wallace calls for a theatre based on particularism. His definition of particularism is borrowed from Richard Schechner and concerns "the way specific associations of people form and express their collective experiences and opinions."[2] Particular groups are formed "according to gender or race or social class or disability or ideology or age. Theatres are gay, lesbian, black, Chicano, deaf, poor, Marxist, Jewish, AIDS, Asian, native American, antinuclear... and so on... Points of view that otherwise would

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[1]Robert Wallace, Producing Marginality (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990) 32.

[2]Wallace 8. Wallace borrows this quote from Richard Schechner, "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting," The Drama Review T121 (Spring 1989): 5.

get lost in the dominant discourse find visibility."[3] Wallace distinguishes particularity from specificity or individuality by explaining that "to be particular is to hold points of view that often are made invisible by the dominant discourse."[4] In advocating a theatre of particularism, Wallace borrows heavily from post-modern and feminist performance critics such as Jill Dolan who suggest that most theatrical performance addresses an "ideal spectator". This ideal spectator is assumed to be "white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male."[5] Dolan and other critics are dedicated to "denaturalizing the position of the ideal spectator as a representative of the dominant culture."[6] They hope this will enable the feminist spectator to better dismantle dominant ideology.

However, in his checklist of particular qualities, Wallace omits geography. He suggests that in an attempt to form national identity, Canadians have asserted "regional, even local, particularities."[7] This is undoubtedly true. Regionalism has been integral to Canadian culture since its beginnings. Its importance to Canadian theatre was well-documented in 1980 in Diane Bessai's article "The Regionalism of Canadian Drama".[8] Wallace himself illustrated its importance in an article entitled "Writing the Land Alive: The Playwrights' Vision in English Canada". He suggests that geography offers playwrights specificity, if not particularity:

> Seeking their place in world theatre, Canadian playwrights give a voice to those who assert the necessity of regional responses to global issues. Sifting through the layers of international influence to uncover the seed-bed of their art, our playwrights offer a vision of culture that nurtures the land, not flattens it.[9]

In this statement, Wallace roots regionalism in geography. However, in *Producing Marginality*, he calls for a revision of the term.

In Wallace's eyes, the traditional approach to regionalism, one based on geographical conditions, makes homogeneous assumptions about diverse groups of people. He says, "Discussions of regionalism and Canadian culture usually are based on environmental and geographical definitions. It is my position in the following essays that this ap-

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[3]Ibid.
[4]Wallace 12.
[5]Jill Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 1.
[6]Dolan 1.
[7]Wallace 11.
[8]Diane Bessai, "The Regionalism of Canadian Drama," Canadian Literature 85 (1980): 7-20.
[9]Robert Wallace, "Writing the Land Alive: The Playwrights' Vision in English Canada," Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions. Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1985: 81.

proach to regionalism has become outmoded and nonproductive, at least as it relates to Canadian theatre."[10]

Dissatisfied with our current reading of regionalism, one based on geography, Wallace suggests redefining regionalism according to particularity:

> I propose that regionality be approached as a social and imaginative construction, not as a geographical condition. This allows that regions, like communities, can be formed by people who share particular qualities and interests.... I believe that theatre that announces and affirms such particularity is necessary to the survival of Canadian culture.[11]

For Wallace, regionalism in English Canada exists in the imagination, not on the map. He suggests that unlike Quebec, other parts of Canada create regions that "exist only in art".[12] In other words, the west is not a concrete geographical reality, but an imaginative construction. Wallace says, "This allows William New to suggest that the 'west' is more an idea than a place, and one that can be applied to works created across the country."[13] He explains that because many English Canadians move from outside Ontario to Toronto, there is "a general sense of dislocation as people from across the country relinquish an understanding of a particular place - as well as a commitment to it - in their search for work and recognition."[14] He continues:

> This general sense of dislocation allows Eli Mandel, a westerner moved east, to refine William New's idea in an important way. For Mandel, not only is the west an attitude or state of mind, but the 'westerner' is a person 'not so much in place, as out of place and so endlessly trying to get back, to find his way home, to return, to write himself into existence'. Indeed, 'westerner' is Mandel's description of a type of Canadian who may live anywhere in the country.[15]

Later in the book, Wallace develops this idea into a shifting understanding of regions. He proposes a "fragmented and fluid approach to regionalism - one based on the relativity of human perception, not the immutability of physical environment."[16] He portrays the Canadian map as one that is continually changing. He says that, "In this post-

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[10]Robert Wallace, Producing Marginality (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990) 12.
[11]Wallace 12.
[12]Wallace 42.
[13]Wallace 42.
[14]Wallace 42.
[15]Wallace 42-43.
[16]Wallace 151.

modern perspective, Canada's cultural landscape is constantly in flux, resembling not so much a map in an atlas as a weather system on a television set."[17]

While Wallace's concept of a theatre of particularism is valuable and represents one way of ensuring that theatre speaks directly and meaningfully to an audience, his revision of regionalism and dismissal of geography are informed by his own Central Canadian perspective and relate primarily to those playwrights who have left their region of origin and are now living in Toronto. His theory of shifting regionalism excludes women who have not moved to Central Canada. Those who maintain that a "westerner" is a person "not so much in place, as out of place and so endlessly trying to get back to find *his* way home, to return, to write *himself* into existence, (emphasis added)"[18] are privileging the point of view of those who left, not those who stayed. For women working and writing in the West, this remark suggests a double marginalization of geography and gender. The language used by Eli Mandel and borrowed for Wallace's purposes subsumes the female experience into the masculine possessive. Indeed, as we shall see later, biases like these set up the ideal Canadian spectator as a male Torontonian and encourage women playwrights in the West to minimize their particular perspective.

The marginalization of those living outside of Toronto is one of the fundamental problems at the heart of both *Producing Marginality* and *Fair Play*, a recent collection of interviews with "Canadian" women playwrights conducted and edited by Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much. For example, Rudakoff and Much fail to mention that of the twelve women who were interviewed, only two were not living in Toronto. At the time, Wendy Lill was living in Halifax, and Sharon Pollock was living in Fredericton. This oversight is so invisible in the eyes of Toronto-based criticism that the back cover actually claims the book presents conversations with Canadian playwrights who are "living in different regions of Canada."

Wallace's *Producing Marginality* is problematic for similar reasons. Although Wallace draws conclusions about "Canadian" theatre, or "English-Canadian" theatre, terms he uses interchangeably, almost all of his research is based in Toronto and Montreal. For someone so concerned about the invisible biases operating in Canadian theatre criticism, he makes very large assumptions about the relevance of Toronto-centric material to the

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[17]Wallace 152.
[18]Wallace 42-43.

rest of Canadian theatre. He states for instance, that "while a discussion of Canadian theatre since 1970 can be approached from a variety of perspectives, inevitably it must address the situation of theatre in Montreal and Toronto to become truly relevant."[19] Clearly, Wallace is unaware that his proposed revision of regionalism without geography is perhaps only "truly relevant" to those living in Toronto, not to those living in the West or other (ex)centric areas such as the Maritimes.

If we examine both *Fair Play* and this collection of interviews, we can see that Wallace's call for a regionalism defined according to his understanding of particularity has some relevance for those women who have left their region of origin for Central Canada, but little relevance for those who currently live in the West. Playwrights who find themselves living in parts of the country that they did not originally call "home" often place greater importance on their personal space than on their geographical region. However, as we shall see later, this does not erase the impact that geography formerly had and currently has on both their writing and their experience as a writer.

Most of the playwrights in *Fair Play* currently live in Toronto, but as Rudakoff and Much explain in their introduction, "The writers hail from one end of the country to the other."[20] They inform us that:

> Other dominant concerns reflected in the themes that reverberate throughout the body of work created by these playwrights are the exploration of where and what 'Home' is, what forces may threaten it and how to maintain and protect it once it is achieved. 'Home' for many of the playwrights is a sense of safety, an understanding of personal identity or, quite simply, a sense of control over one's life and destiny.[21]

For the women included in *Fair Play*, "Home" is not fixed in geographical terms. Although the collection represents a welcome addition to Canadian theatre criticism, one cannot help but wonder how their understanding of "home" would have shifted if the collection included interviews with more women not living in Toronto.

The playwrights included in this collection who are originally from the West but now live in Toronto also seem to place great importance on their immediate personal space. For Pamela Boyd, the kitchen table where she writes influences the content and style of

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[19]Wallace 37.
[20]Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much, Fair Play (Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1990) 10.
[21]Rudakoff and Much 10.

her work. She explains that her plan to cloister herself away in a Benedictine Abbey in Saskatchewan for two weeks stems from a need to get away from both her kitchen table and her style of writing:

> This piece, so far, at least in the first draft, has a very, very conventional structure. It's a family drama set in a kitchen. It's what my husband calls kitchen table drama. It just came out of me that way no matter how firmly I made up my mind that that wasn't going to be it. It has come out of me that way and I'm very bored with that. I'm very frustrated with it and I really want to depart from it, but part of the reason it's happened, is that it's so much a part of me, of my life. When I write, I'm ten steps from the kitchen table. You get two hours on Wednesday and four hours on Thursday between picking up the kids and doing grocery shopping and balancing all those things at once. So I think that's one of the things that's locking me into this structure which I really, really, desperately want to depart from. And this piece really needs a departure from it because it's so connected with contemporary art, which in Czechoslovakia is very abstract.[22]

For Boyd, who is writing about a Czech artist's struggles to maintain her creative voice while living in Ontario cottage country, personal space becomes more important than geographical space. Similarly, Joanna Glass, who also lives in Toronto, explains that houses have an impact on her ability to write:

> I like this old house a lot. It's a hundred and one years old this year. Houses have always been very important to me because I hardly ever go out. Writers are pretty much hermits, so houses are important, and I really like the house and I like the neighborhood. (59)

Glass, originally from Saskatoon and recently transplanted to Toronto from the Eastern United States, places great emphasis on the house she lives in.

Joan MacLeod, the third Westerner living in Toronto included in this collection, also pointed out the relationship between her writing and her immediate personal environment. In explaining why she prefers Toronto to Vancouver, she states:

> Things like this apartment building: it's full of other artists and actors and writers. I love that kind of thing. Brooke Johnson, who was the original Jhanna in *Toronto, Mississippi* and who was also in my last play, her and her boyfriend David Fox, who is also a terrific actor, live right over there [MacLeod points down the hall]. Leslie Toy, who did *Jewel* in Vancouver, she lives on the third floor. Kenny Gardner, who has a show opening next Tuesday at the DuMaurier festival, he lives on the third floor. Michael McGuire, who's Sally Clark's cousin and a composer I'm working with, he lives on the second floor. So that stuff's great. (44)

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[22]Interview with Pamela Boyd, 69. Subsequent references taken from the interviews with the playwrights will list the page number in parentheses.

As *Fair Play* suggests, many of these women have eked a sense of "home" out of their personal space rather than their geographical region. Although other writers may feel that their immediate surroundings affect their writing or their process of writing, it is striking that all three of the playwrights living in Toronto remarked on its importance of their own accord.

However, this emphasis on personal space does not erase the importance that geography holds for both those living in Toronto and those living in the West. For most of the women in this collection geography has great impact on their experience, perspective, identity, imagination, writing process and the content, style and reception of their work.

The term "geography" can be sub-divided into different kinds of geography. In *Producing Marginality* Wallace doesn't offer a definition of geography, but based on his use of the word, we can assume that he connects geography with topography. In contrast, the Oxford English Dictionary defines geography in broader terms as "the science which has for its object the description of the earth's surface, treating of its form and physical features, its natural and political divisions, the climate, productions, population, etc. of the various countries."[23] The broader definition offered by the OED hints at geography's potential implications. The significance that geography holds for both culture in general and the theatrical experience in particular is made evident by this collection of interviews. I would suggest that geography can be either imaginative or real. Imaginative geography can belong to the memory or the imagination. Real geography is either social or physical, and relates to the changing and continuing make-up of a place and its climate, topography, location, population and politics. In *Producing Marginality*, Wallace does not give full credit to the enormous impact that both imaginative geography and real geography have on a playwright.

These interviews bear witness to the significance of both kinds of geography. For those writers who no longer live in their region of origin, geography is partly imaginative. For Joan MacLeod and Joanna Glass, the landscape of the West continues to inform their imagination through memory. Glass lived in the United States from the late 1950s until the late 1980s when she moved to Toronto. Her work is often set in Saskatchewan and although she returns to her roots in memory, she can no longer return in person:

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[23] The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., vol. 6 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 459-60.

> I haven't been back to Saskatoon since my mother died, which was in the early seventies. This comes back to Saskatoon being sort of an entity out there somewhere for me. It's almost impossible for me to go back at all. And if I went, I think I would want to go without any remaining people in my family knowing I was there. I think I would just want to walk around and see what had changed. The streets of my youth, the buildings are all very indelible to me, and of course, I think a lot of it has changed. It's interesting how artists very frequently spend their whole lives running away from that pain of childhood. Of course there's absolutely no way to run away from it at all. You carry it with you all the time. (56)

Saskatoon exists as a creation of her imagination and her memory, not as a living physical place. Although Saskatoon is still a part of Glass, Glass is no longer a part of Saskatoon.

Other playwrights share Glass' need to live in places other than where they grew up. When asked why she has few connections to theatres in British Columbia, Sharon Stearns explains, "Vancouver is where I'm from. I don't know - It's hard to go back to the place that you were born and raised in." (151)

Similarly, MacLeod has lived in Toronto since the mid-1980s, but still sees herself in terms of her origins. She says, "I'm a real Westerner. I mean my perception of things is not Toronto gal at all.... Nature and geography and all that stuff is a big part of my work, particularly in my last play." (43) However, it is partly the geographical distance from her region of origin which allows her to write about it. MacLeod, in talking about *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, says, "It really felt like the right time to set something on the West Coast. I have a more distant perspective on it right now." (48)

Geography's significance is not limited to its impact on memory. Real geography, either of the social or physical kind, continues to influence the writer. People are constantly affected by where they live. Provincial and municipal policies, climate and landscape, how far and how close they are to other places, and the make-up of the population all influence a writer's experience and imagination. Sharon Stearns explains that living in an isolated log cabin in the interior of British Columbia offers her an understanding of history and environmental problems that differs from those who live in an urban milieu. Maureen Hunter credits the freezing Winnipeg winters as one of the reasons she writes. Pamela Boyd balked at the idea of going back to Calgary because it's "so bloody white." (65)

The impact that real geography has on writers is evident in the environment of the interviews themselves. Talking to Patricia Ludwick while watching eagles land on the beach provided a very different context for a conversation than sitting at the Lick'n Chicken with Pamela Boyd, watching cars roar down Bloor. The rhythm and tone of each interview can be traced back to its context, of which social or physical geography forms a major part.

Most writers have a relationship to both social and physical geography. For some, physical and social geography are located in different places. For example, although Sharon Stearns abandoned an urban life-style for an isolated wilderness environment, she notes the need to develop greater contact with theatre communities in the city. Joan MacLeod has also found a delicate balance between seeking out those places that are "charged" for her, and finding a place within a community that supports her work. She explains that her physical, geographical surroundings inform her writing:

> Where I live is always important to me. It's always a big deal. I'm so self-centered. There's been places that I've lived that are very magical to me. And I keep writing about them again and again: the Gulf Islands, Northern B.C., Southern Alberta. Those places are just charged for me. The Rocky Mountains. When I live in those places, I get a lot of work done. And they keep creeping up in my work, again and again. (45)

MacLeod, although she currently resides in Toronto, maintains contact with those "magical" places. She spends a few months of each year in Vancouver, and often spends the summer in Banff. Her urban, Eastern environment of Toronto has also found its way into her work. *Toronto, Mississippi* is set in a living room in Toronto. She explains that "there was something freeing about writing *Toronto, Mississippi*, about writing a play that took place in a city. Even though I've spent a lot of time in the country, I grew up in the city." (45)

MacLeod also places importance on her social geography, the geography connected to the population of where she lives. Ultimately, her decision to relocate in Toronto from Vancouver was based on finding a place within the Toronto theatre community. She explains that Toronto, unlike Vancouver, offered her a community in which to write. She says, "I just never felt part of a writing community or an artistic community at all when I lived in the West." (44)

Other writers see their physical and social geography as inextricably linked. For Patricia Ludwick and Barbara Sapergia, the place and the people that make up their surroundings are integral to their ability to continue as artists. Ludwick says, "Living here on Gabriolla has made me feel so much more at ease with who I am and how I live and the people around me and the way I relate to the world, that naturally my writing changes. It's easier for me to write here because it's easier for me to be alive." (161-62) Similarly, Barbara Sapergia explains that Saskatoon is "a very nurturing environment for me. I love the scale of things here in Saskatoon and this is where I think I can work best. I might go away for a period of time but this is my base." (107).

For many artists, the ability to understand or feel part of a place and a community is connected to their ability to create. For example, Beverley Simons, who otherwise gives very little credence to the importance of geography, explains that she turned down an agent's offer to move to New York because, "I would feel New York breaking down the walls of where I lived. I wasn't interested in being in that environment because my voice would become like several of the people she already handled." (138) Conni Massing, when asked a similar question about moving, says,

> I have to admit that if I, for some reason, was transplanted to New York right now and had to write there and try to make that my home as a writer, that I would suddenly become very, very conscious of: "What do these people want to watch and do I have the sensibility to give it to them?" I don't really think about that much here. I would probably start to get conscious of that in Toronto, as much as I hate to admit it, because it's a very big city. It's much bigger than Edmonton and it is the centre of the universe. I'm sure it would cross my mind. So maybe that is limiting. (121)

As Massing explains, moving to New York or Toronto would dislocate her from her own sensibility and ultimately from her audience. In this way, geography plays an important role in matching the perspective of artists to audiences. Ironically, Massing's remark seems contradictory given that, as we shall see later, she and other playwrights express a strong interest in marketing their plays in the East. In looking towards the East as the primary market for their work, Western artists fail to recognize the natural connections that their work may have to possible audiences at home. As Peggy Thompson explains, when artists are at home in their environment, "the writers and the audience share a common vision. Even a play like *Alone*[24] [by Patricia Ludwick]. Although it wasn't funny, it was completely about this part of the world." (129)

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[24]Patricia Ludwick's *Alone*, which is mentioned several times in various interviews, is the story of a woman who finds herself alone on an island off of Alaska. She calls on her own physical and mental resources to survive. Ludwick, who based the play on an American woman's diaries, fragments the

Pamela Boyd's most recent play, *Odd Fish*, helps to explain how geography can act as a link between artists and their work, artists and their audiences, and audiences and culture in general. The main character, Jana, is a woman sculptor from Czechoslovakia who abandoned and subsequently denied her artistic past upon immigration to Canada. In a scene between Jana and her long-lost Czech lover, Jana explains why she was unable to work as an artist in her new country:

Jana I.....couldn't find.....the....the pieces of the puzzle.

Mirek What puzzle?

Jane I don't know...the puzzle that allowed me to continue being an artist....a place to feel safe, nurtured. I couldn't find a home.

Mirek Yes?

Jana There is no dignity, no love or understanding. This sounds silly, I know, but.....culture isn't...it isn't....there isn't.....culture here.

Mirek What?

Jana Not the way we mean culture, where it's a part of everything, automatic, a reflection of...of how we are, who we are, as people. It's not like that here....

Mirek Of course not, this is a young country, but.....

Jana ....in this country culture, or rather artistic inclinations are something young people grow out of to become good consumers.

Mirek Culture is how a people speak to each other. A nation can't exist without it.

Jana But it's not one nation, this, it's like a giant refugee camp with everybody with one foot in "the old country" like Uncle Otto. There are dozens of cultures here all strangely frozen and out of place.

Mirek But people write books here, there are theatres here, concerts, paintings. I don't see what this.....

Jana It doesn't come from the forest floor. It's not connected to the people. Mirku, there are miles and miles and miles of Canada out there that think poets and sculptors are something out of story books....story books written in Europe.

Mirek It's a young country, it takes time. The government is.....

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character into three voices, and suggests contact improvisation as the physical means for the three characters to interact.

Jana Oh, the government, the government, don't make me laugh. Pig farmers that can't tell the difference between a painting and a heating duct! This is a govern....no, a whole society, that believes genuine support and nurturing of art and artists is irrelevant. It can be dropped when times are tough.

Mirek The arts thrive in compromised circumstances.

Jana You can't thrive in a vacuum!

Mirek Those are the circumstances with which you work. If you were without a cause at the beginning, you certainly have one now.[25]

Boyd's analysis of Canadian culture draws into question the relationship we have established between artists and audiences in this country. For Boyd, our culture is "not connected to the people" and "doesn't come from the forest floor". Boyd also implies that dislocation can leave an artist without the means to create. Jana's inability to sculpt is at least partly connected to her dislocation from her own environment, and ultimately, her own culture. In reviewing this collection of interviews, one wonders if this description of the dislocated artist might fit Joanna Glass. Although she places great emphasis on her immediate surroundings, such as her house, her continued uncertainty about living in Toronto and living in Canada is communicated throughout the interview. Her theatre network remains in the States and she seems to have problems explaining her decision to move:

> I'm just going to try and calm down a bit about this adjustment to Toronto, because I was getting very hyper about it. Feeling that I was just so peripheral here. Doing all this American screenwriting, and hearing from American theatres just after *Yesteryear* was put on here, I just felt that I was here in body only. (59)

At the end of the interview, she explains "every six months or so, a really black period hits me and I think, 'I'm going back, I don't understand any of it here.'" (59) Perhaps Glass, detached from the physical and social geography of Toronto, is left with an imaginative connection to a remembered Saskatoon and a physical isolation from her American theatre network.

Wallace has greatly underestimated the impact geography has on the artist and its importance in creating a link between artists and audiences. In trying to address the gap that currently exists between playwrights and theatre-goers in this country, and in trying to suggest ways in which Canadian theatre can respond to the changing nature of our

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[25]Pamela Boyd, Odd Fish, unpublished.

population in post-modern times, Wallace turns to particularism. As discussed, his Central Canadian perspective leads to his exclusion of geography from his list of particular qualities. However, even in Wallace's definition of particularism as a point of view "made invisible by the dominant discourse", geography can be called particular. In Wallace's discourse, the perspective of those living in (ex)centric regions are made invisible. In proposing to redefine regionalism in a manner which excludes geography, Wallace fails to recognize the particularism of geography. How someone sees the world is very connected to where they came from and where they currently live. Furthermore, geography can root other particular perspectives, such as those of women, in a specific environment. This can ensure that Wallace's theatre of particularism is specific, rather than homogenous. In the case of women writing for the theatre, geography can also serve as a metaphor for the particular perspective that emerges from the female experience.

For some of the women, living in (ex)centric regions mirrors their experience of being woman writers. Patricia Ludwick, who is very conscious of inhabiting the fringes of the country, says "...there's less and less space for me in the theatres as it is at the moment." (164) She explains that "I have worked my way down in Canadian theatre..... And now I'm working my way out to the edge, to the fringes of the theatres." (162) For Ludwick, her position on the edge of the Pacific parallels "the space" allotted to her as a woman playwright in the Canadian theatre. In *Female Parts*, a recent literary study of five Canadian women playwrights, Yvonne Hodkinson suggests that geography can become a metaphor for the female experience. She describes her book as "the first critical attempt to place women playwrights in a Canadian literary context in which 'myths and legends of landscape' symbolize self-discovery and the quest for an aesthetic as well as a socio-political feminized space."[26] Her study examines the relationship between Canadian women's playwriting and regional myth/landscape. She concludes that "regionalism to these women playwrights is related to female identity, as the setting becomes a metaphor for the unexplored territory of the female imagination."[27] Certainly, Hodkinson's theory is supported by Connie Gault's description of her settings for *Sky* and *The Soft Eclipse*:

> ...when you think of a Prairie setting for *Sky*, what I'm really getting at is the emptiness of the world, and the contrast between the claustrophobia of the little house and the emptiness around it. And then for *The Soft Eclipse*, it's only set in a small town

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[26]Yvonne Hodkinson, Female Parts (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991) 1.
[27]Hodkinson 2.

> because I was interested in examining women's lives that were really shut off from the world. I put them in a small town to emphasize it, but really all women into the mid-60's in Canada, at least in Saskatchewan, were shut off from the rest of the world. (92)

Here, Gault uses the metaphor of a small town to portray a female world. If we believe Hodkinson, geography becomes the means for women to express their particular perspective.

To dismiss the importance of geography, especially in a discussion of regionalism, can lead to homogenization. The women are not all the same simply because they live in the same place and can conjure up a clear image of a prairie sky in less than five seconds flat. In our age, and especially in a country composed of various cultures, we have multiple perspectives. However, those perspectives are also shaped by where we live. Even those with particular qualities and concerns do not necessarily share the perspective of others with similar qualities and concerns who live in different parts of the country or different parts of the world. This was clearly visible at the Second International Women's Playwright's Conference[28] in Toronto, where women were so divided by particular perspectives, they couldn't even engage in dialogue. To assume that one particularity can provide the basis for homogeneous conclusions is absurd. In *Fair Play*, Rudakoff and Much, despite the emphasis the book places on the writers' gender, came up with varied responses. They state, "Naturally, these discussions... vary in tone and timbre according to the particular background, personality and artistic goals of the individual playwrights. We discovered early in our research that the same questions often triggered totally different responses, responses that frequently led the conversations in directions we could never have anticipated."[29] Rudakoff and Much might have added many other things to this list of influences on each writer's response, including region of origin.

This collection of interviews presents views which are not only different, but often irreconcilable. Few concerns are shared by all playwrights: a lack of control over the play development process, a worry about the economic consequences of being a playwright, and a call for more women directors and artistic directors. In trying to provide a framework for discussing the collection as a whole, I turned to geography rather than gender.

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[28]This conference, held in Toronto in May, 1991 was marked by deep divisions among the women delegates.

[29]Rudakoff and Much 10.

The patterns of similarities and differences emerge by region. The playwrights in British Columbia share concerns that are different from the playwrights in the Prairie provinces and different again from the playwrights who live in Toronto. Each woman's experience of being a playwright and identity as a writer are as influenced by where they currently live, as where they originally came from.

The playwrights in British Columbia share concerns related to social geography: the lack of provincial funding and the subsequent inability of the theatre community to flourish. They share an identity of isolation and marginalization emerging from the physical geography of the province - both its topography and location. Sharon Stearns and Patricia Ludwick, the only two that continue to write for the theatre, live in isolation from urban centres. Stearns connected her identity and work to rural or non-urban history. Conscious of overlooking the expanse of Pacific that looms outside her living room, Ludwick places herself on the fringes of Canadian theatre.

The Prairie writers, who live in thriving theatrical communities, have very different experiences and concerns, often related to a perceived Eastern bias against "Western" work. As a result, individuality seemed to form the core of the Prairie identity. As Connie Gault noted, she was concerned with "maintaining an individual vision" (90). This mandate is reiterated in a recent article in *Canadian Theatre Review* that prints excerpts from interviews with three Saskatchewan women playwrights, including Connie Gault and Barbara Sapergia. Marina Endicott, who conducted the interviews, says,

> Within Saskatchewan people have been working as, and thinking of, themselves as playwrights rather than male playwrights/female playwrights. There are so few playwrights, so little theatre, that we can't afford to divide. Our "particularity" has not been Schechner's "specific association of people who wish to form and express their collective experiences and opinions" (which Wallace uses in *Producing Marginality*) - it would be hard to come up with a collective opinion, or a collective experience except the geographical, from playwrights in Saskatchewan. The association of these writers is not in order to promote any regional vision, but to serve the individual visions of our individual playwrights.[30]

Endicott rejects Wallace's notion of particularity and states that Saskatchewan playwrights are individual rather than particular. The subtext of her remarks suggests that for Saskatchewan women playwrights, individuality is more strongly connected to uni-

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[30]Marina Endicott, "Saskatchewan Women Playwrights," Canadian Theatre Review 69 (Winter 1991): 27.

versality than particularity. As we shall see later, in an attempt to present their work as universal, and thus marketable, many playwrights deny their particular qualities.

The playwrights in Toronto also embraced the universal, and felt that audiences did not differ according to region and that "truthful" writing could cross regional boundaries. In general, the Toronto writers expressed an interest in reaching larger markets across the country or beyond Canada.

The emphasis that the Toronto writers place on the universality of their work and the emphasis that the Prairie writers place on the individuality of their work points to the many contradictions presented by these interviews. On the one hand, the influence geography has had on each writer's experience, imagination and writing is made extremely clear in these interviews. On the other hand, many of the playwrights down-play both its importance and the importance of gender. In an effort to escape the Central Canadian bias against "regional" work and secure more productions with a wider audience, many of the writers disregard the specificity of where they live, what they write about, and who they write for. In trying to create work that is universal, they reject what makes them particular. This is especially true of the Prairie playwrights who are stuck between centrality and marginality.

Many of these writers emphasize the universality of their work, and minimize the potential differences between audiences in the East and the West. Joan MacLeod says, "...a character who speaks the truth and speaks simply, crosses all kinds of regional lines." (41) She adds later, "...Who knows how to tell what works in one city and not the other. Hopefully the plays are strong enough to work anywhere." (42) Joanna Glass expresses a similar idea: "One hopes that the writing, if it's good enough, will have a universality about it, where it will really travel." (53) The Prairie writers also suggested their work had broad appeal by de-emphasizing its setting. In discussing *Gravel Run*, Conni Massing says, "...one of the things I've been resisting in discussions with certain people since either of those productions: is some kind of belief that it doesn't go as well with an urban audience, or something.... I think the things that the play talks about are not exclusive to a small prairie town." (115) Connie Gault similarly suggests, "[*Sky*] is not set in any time or place. It's set in people's heads." (93) Maureen Hunter, talking about *Footprints on the Moon*, adds, "...I never set out to write a play that compared rural and urban." (78)

This hesitancy to embrace the aspects of their writing that might be categorized as "regional" is mirrored by the hesitancy triggered by questions of gender. Although many of the women felt that their gender informed their work, they also refused to label themselves as particular. Most statements implying that their experience as women had influenced their writing were qualified by other statements which played down the possible impact that gender might have on determining their audience. Maureen Hunter, in describing *Footprints on the Moon* says, "I don't want to call it a woman's play." (77) She explains that, "I've gone through stages of being an ardent feminist, and I've kind of swung part way back again I guess. So I think that the feminist voice is there, but basically what I try to do is care about my characters, male or female, and come to understand them.... I do really like men and I hope that shows in my work because I've tried to create men that I care about." (85) Similarly, although Connie Gault calls her writing "female, feminine and feminist writing", she explains "that doesn't mean that's necessarily the best thing. I would probably say that the best voice for a writer is an androgynous voice...." (95)

Many of the writers felt that writing with a female voice would limit the scope of their work. Beverley Simons explains that "...it would be false for me to speak only from the woman's perspective." (142) She says, "When I'm working, I don't experience myself in any deep sense as a woman or as a Canadian.... I'm a human being first. My sensibility, the topics that I want to deal with, and the people who I want to speak to are in that larger scope." (136) Conni Massing insists that her gender does not prevent her from creating believable male characters. She says, "I guess there are more women than men in my plays, but I don't feel like I can't write male characters. I guess that's why I'm feeling kind of leery and vague here." (122) Barbara Sapergia insists that "...I think I can write good male characters as well." (108) On a similar note, Sharon Stearns says, "I love to write male characters, just as much as I love to write female characters." (149)

The lack of response some writers have received from theatres with a feminist mandate has compounded their sense that being labelled "a woman writer" would limit their potential audience. Maureen Hunter explains that "the only play that I've sent to Nightwood is *Queen Street* and they've still got it. I haven't heard from them. I did meet Kate Lushington a few weeks ago. I guess I wouldn't normally seek out feminist theatres for my plays, so maybe that says something about the kind of audience that I want." (85) Other writers, including Joan MacLeod and Barbara Sapergia, tell similar stories.

Connected to this drive towards universality and broad appeal is a concern for finding larger markets. Joan MacLeod talks about "crossing the border" from small regional theatres into large prestigious houses such as the Royal Alex. She says, "I think if I was given that opportunity, if they ran *Toronto, Mississippi* at the Royal Alex, I think it would do well. I think people would like it." (46-47) Similarly, Joanna Glass expresses an interest in finding the largest possible market for her work. After sinking so much time, money and effort into a play, she wants more than one production.

> ...I still think that the big audience for me is in the States. I'm not thinking so much in financial terms anymore, but you want it seen. If you've spent two years all by yourself in a room racking your brain over this thing, you want more than a couple of productions. (59)

The Prairie writers also talk in terms of markets. Conni Massing says,

> That's one of the things I want to do this year actually: is be more active in pursuing productions in other cities.... I would really like to be produced in other places. I would love to be produced in Toronto. (121)

Barbara Sapergia also states an interest in being produced in Toronto, although she is not willing to leave Saskatoon. She explains:

> If you make a commitment to stay in a place like Saskatoon, which I've done, I think it makes it harder to get your plays accepted elsewhere, to get them produced. I hope that sooner or later, the accretion of the body of work that I do, will gradually allow this to happen without having to move to Toronto. (108)

The fear for most of the Prairie writers is that Toronto biases will prevent their work from getting a second production and reaching a broader audience. This bias is not imagined, but very real. Many of the writers have sensed a hesitancy towards their work, based on its Western context. Referring to *Gravel Run*, Conni Massing explains that "I actually got a letter from an artistic director, saying something along those lines: 'I liked the play but I don't think it would go that well in this kind of environment because it's kind of a rural play.'" (115)

Writers feel that being branded "Western" will restrict where they will be produced and who will see their work. Glass suggests that writing which is too embedded in geography cannot cross regional lines: "There still is something about nailing it down to one small geographical area that represses it in some way." (58-59)

Some of the writers suggest that they should not have given their plays a Western setting. Connie Gault confesses that

> it's a bit maddening to write a play set in a small town in the Prairies. It makes you mad that you did it, if you want to know the truth, because you know that people are going to say, "Oh another Prairie play. The same play. Another elevator drama." So first of all, the theatre people are going to have a prejudice against it. All the people who review it and look at it are going to have the same kind of prejudices against it. Just automatically. (92)

She continues, suggesting that she should have given *Sky* a less specific setting. In order to escape the biases that people have against "prairie plays", she says, "I almost should have had it occur on the moon or something like that." (92)

Maureen Hunter, goes one step further and has deliberately set her new play in another country and another century. She explains:

> I wanted to get right out of Western Canada. Right out of Canada.... Obviously I can't write about Toronto. I've never lived in Toronto. And I don't want to be branded as a Prairie playwright in that sense. I was sort of tossing around for an idea, but what I'm taking on is crazy because it's another century and another country. It's not going to be easy. (79)

In a drive towards broader appeal, many of these women seem to be rejecting their own environment and their own gender. This denial has potentially destructive ramifications for Canadian culture in general and Canadian theatre, in particular. Geography and particularity have strong links to the creation of a community. Unlike prose or fiction, the theatrical performance demands collaboration and creates a community by bringing people together in one space at one time. In this way, theatre is a less individualistic form than prose and fiction which enables a single mind to speak directly to another single mind through print. Without the creation of a community, theatre is left without an audience.

The roots of this denial of self become clearer if we examine the distance that exists between theatre artists and theatre audiences in Canada. This gap is communicated throughout the interviews, and is partly the subject of Wallace's book. Many playwrights are unable to find their particular audience, even in their own region. For example, Connie Gault, whose second play, *The Soft Eclipse*, was produced at the Globe

Theatre in Regina, explains that the Globe's audience was not the natural audience for her work:

> We're kind of in a strange situation here in Regina. There's only the one theatre, and they're in very bad shape financially. They took quite a risk last year, or a so-called risk, in putting on a few Canadian plays. They are putting on some more Canadian plays this year, so I'm very pleased about that. But their audience, traditionally, or at least in the last several years, hasn't been the kind of audience that is probably the best audience for my plays. (93-94)

She suggests that her work appeals to "people who are not easily bored, and who don't mind looking under things." (92) She explains that "in some theatres they wouldn't have much of an audience and in some they'd have more." (91-92) Theatre-goers at the Globe "do it for a social occasion or do it for the entertainment.... I don't think it's the best audience for these plays...." (94)

Maureen Hunter seems faced with a similar situation. Her work has been consistently produced by the Manitoba Theatre Centre, but in their Warehouse space rather than on the mainstage. For her new play, she was offered a mainstage slot, even before it was written. Part of her anxiety in writing this new script seemed connected to her understanding of the MTC audience:

> I think one of the things that concerns me about working with MTC on my new play is that there's some talk about mainstage. As soon as they say mainstage, I just freeze because I don't like anything that they've done on mainstage. Although I'd like to have the money from a mainstage production, I don't really want a mainstage production. I'm going to be seeing Stephen next week and that's one of the things that I want to talk to him about. I want to think of this play as a Warehouse play because otherwise it inhibits me so much. I know the stuff that people who go to MTC want to see. (82)

Like Hunter and Gault, many of the playwrights possess a sense of what I term their "natural" audience, or whom their work naturally appeals to. This "natural" audience is often determined by gender or region. For example, Joan MacLeod, in discussing *Jewel*, says, "Certainly women really really respond to it." (38) Later in the interview she says, "...there's something in my work that Westerners respond to." (41) Pamela Boyd says, "Women like my plays." (63) Connie Gault explains that *The Soft Eclipse* "appeals in particular to women." (92), and Maureen Hunter states, "*Footprints* is a play that really seems to reach women." (77)

These statements seem striking given that most of these same playwrights promote the universality of their work and come up blank when posed some version of the following question: "Who is your audience?" For the most part, writers provided surprisingly vague answers. Even those women who had an image for their "natural" audience, could not match it to their "actual" one. Consider the following excerpts:

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of your audience; of who goes to your plays?*

MacLeod: Tarragon subscribers. Who goes to my plays? Tarragon's a real mixed-bag audience.... So it's a real mixed bag of people. (46)

Johnson: *When you think of the audience for your work, do you have an image?*

Glass: Not really.... One hopes that the writing, if it's good enough, will have a universality about it, where it will really travel. (53)

Johnson: *Do you think in terms of your audience when you write? Who are you writing for?*

Boyd: No, I guess I don't think in terms of my audience. (63)

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of who is drawn to your work? Or does it really depend on what theatre is doing it?*

Massing: I think so. I don't even know. I think it depends very much on the theatre. The image of the theatre is very powerful in determining who's going to end up coming to the play. Their normal audience is subscribers. Yeah. I don't really know. I used to have a better idea when I did more things at the Fringe. (116)

Johnson: ....*Who is drawn to your work?*

Hunter: I noticed that you had that question in there. You see, it's hard for me to say, because I think each of my plays has been so different. (76)

Johnson: *Who do you see as your audience?*

Stearns: I sure wish I had a better handle on that. I don't think about that enough. I really don't. (149)

Most of the writers in this collection either refuse or are unable to describe their actual audience. They fear limiting themselves to a particular and often limited or undeveloped market. Economic pressures and anti-regional biases contribute to these playwrights' rejection of qualities that link them to particular audiences. However, the gap between playwright and audience is also created by our methods of theatrical production.

In the Canadian theatre, we ask playwrights to write for theatres, rather than audiences. We create audiences for theatres, rather than audiences for plays. These theatres, due to economic demands and a subscription season base, are often unwilling to produce work that will alienate their audience. Those playwrights who are lucky enough to have the financial security of being attached to a theatre must work within the confines of the theatre's mandate and aesthetic vision. Those not attached to theatres must write scripts that are broad enough to market to any number of companies. Many of the writers in this collection feel excluded from theatres that maintain a "stable" of writers and prefer to develop their work in a playwright's centre which offers them greater control over the process. Connie Gault says,

> The other problem with this system is that theatres develop protegé writers whose work they're obviously interested in. They've put some investment - time and money - into these writers, so obviously they're going to be looking at their scripts. It becomes quite a little in-house thing. (91)

Similarly, Barbara Sapergia says, "any particular theatre tends to have a spectrum of things that it's interested in, or spectrum of people that they're interested in." (103) Sapergia and Gault imply that these theatres can exclude work which does not fit into their mandate or vision.

Because we leave audience development in the hands of individual theatres, who often plan seasons according to the tastes of their subscribers rather than appealing to new audiences, Canadian playwrights rely on a theatre, and not on their own work, to determine the audience for their plays. As we have seen, this can leave a playwright at odds with their assigned audience. It can also limit a playwright's ability to experiment with new forms or styles.

Robert Wallace suggests that theatres have begun to produce work that is either similar or identical. He says that "While most of the regionals now include one or two Canadian plays in a season of five or six main-stage productions, these rarely are new or

innovative. In effect, the regionals' seasons allow a few Canadian plays to move across the country rather than a variety to emerge in any one region."[31] This phenomenon of one play which is produced by all the regionals describes some of Joan MacLeod's work. *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's Blue Guitar* were both highly successful with many of the regionals across the country.

This phenomenon is not restricted to the larger regional theatres. Wallace suggests that the "alternate" theatres, those which sprung up in the seventies and eighties in response to the "regional" theatres, are also losing the qualities that made them distinctive:

> Twenty years after their emergence, most of these theatres have become bastions of entrenched power with little identifiable vision or identity - cultural institutions whose investment in maintaining their portion of the market equals that of the regionals. Most avoid the challenges of social and artistic innovation that were their original raison d'être in favour of the "safe" programming to which Richard Nieoczym refers - plays that look much the same no matter where they are produced. While this is beneficial for the (few) playwrights whose scripts receive multiple productions across the country, it is destructive to the creation of distinctive theatre.[32]

Supporting Wallace's analysis, the 1990-91 Annual Report for the Canada Council says, "There is also the risk that in constantly being forced to pool their resources, theatre companies will begin to lose their distinctive profiles."[33]

If Canadian theatres are producing work that is interchangeable, it might be argued that their audiences are also interchangeable, despite their regional differences. Many theatre professionals suggest that Canadian theatres draw the same upper-income segment of the population across the country. This can be backed up by several studies which suggest that performing arts audiences in Canada are mostly composed of people with post-secondary education and white collar or professional employment.[34] Additionaly, in the findings from the recently completed Canadian Arts Consumer Profile[35] which surveyed more than 50,000 Canadians on their relationship to the arts, most people listed

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[31]Wallace 144.
[32]Wallace 145-146.
[33]The Canada Council, 1990-91 Annual Report (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1991) 14.
[34]These studies include: A Survey of Arts Audience Studies: A Canadian Perspective 1967-1984 by Claire McCaughey, The State of the Arts: A Graphic Trend Analysis of Currently Available Empirical Evidence, prepared by the Canada Council in 1989, and Survey of the Theatre Audience in Metropolitan Montreal, prepared by the Quebec Drama Federation in 1991.
[35]This report, compiled by Decima Research of Toronto and Les Consultants Cultur'inc of Montreal, is due to be released in the Fall of 1992.

expense as their main reason for not going out.[36] The 1990-91 Annual Report for the Canada Council, reviews the year by saying, "the negative side has been fewer and fewer new productions, shorter runs of plays by many theatre companies, and much higher ticket prices."[37] Also, many theatres depend upon and plan their programming according to the tastes of their subscription audience. One might assume that this audience, able to pay a large sum at once, does not belong to the lower income brackets. In any case, high ticket prices will limit the range of audience able to attend a performance.

Some of the playwrights in this collection share this perception that theatre-going is elitist. When talking about audiences in Calgary, Pamela Boyd says, "It's that same segment of the Toronto population that goes to the theatre here." (66) Conni Massing has a similar perception of the demographics of audiences in Edmonton. She says,

> It's extremely elite. It's even down to people being from a particular area of the city. I think most of the city's theatre audience is drawn from an area extending from the University south to about 30th Avenue. And I'm not really kidding when I say that. The demographics show that.... And obviously different theatres have different characters of audiences. The Phoenix subscription audience has a very different character than the people who go to the Shoctor. There are certain distinctive qualities to different audiences, but theatre basically attracts white, middle to upper class, university educated. All those things. I think that holds true for almost any theatre in the city. So obviously we're not winching many non-traditional audiences, and I don't know if there's any answer to that. I would like to think there was. (120-121)

Joanna Glass states that theatre is "a very elitist pursuit" because theatres only draw a certain kind of spectator:

> ...I've always felt that there's something very irregular in the fact that small theatres absolutely adore taking on subject matter that has to do with the forgotten, the downtrodden, the underdog in society. The strongest political messages are found in those theatres. And those theatres draw an audience of the converted because only those people who feel akin to those ideas have the money to go. (56-57)

Glass points to a practice employed by Scandinavian countries and suggests that Canadian theatres open their dress and technical rehearsals to high school students. She explains, "there, you are creating your audience. When those people get out of high school, maybe even if they are plumbers or wall paper hangers, that is ingrained. It is something that they will do." (57)

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[36]Christopher Harris, "Popcorn May be Wrong, Report Suggests," The Globe and Mail 29 May 1992: D1.

[37]The Canada Council, 1990-91 Annual Report (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1991) 14.

Many of the playwrights embrace the idea of "mixed" audiences. They point to Fringes or "Sunday-pay-what-you-can's" as favorite performances of a particular show. Peggy Thompson says that her favorite theatrical experience, *West End*, managed to bring many different audiences together in one place:

> *West End* really was Sodom North. That was a bringing together of different people's audiences. There was Morris' audience, there was John Moffat's audience, there was my audience, there was Kate's audience, there was Peter's audience, there was the band's audience, there was Jill Dawn's audience. For once, it was a pulling together of disparate groups.... (131)

Patricia Ludwick goes one step further and suggests that the survival of theatre depends on the theatre community's ability to create a heterogeneous audience:

> Certainly when I was performing, the regular season ticket holders were a lot less interesting to play to than the Sunday afternoon "pay what you can" audiences that came in for a quarter.... So I feel that for the health - the financial health as well as the creative health - of the Arts, for goodness sakes, start mixing those people up. Don't keep dividing it all off into the staid people with a lot of money and some interest. Most people who buy a subscription season to the Arts Club Theatre are back at the symphony the next season just to give themselves different options in the Arts. So all of the Arts are competing for the same few people, instead of mixing up a few barefoot, rowdy teenagers in with those opera audiences. If you do that you're probably going to make the whole experience feel different. It'll have more "edges".... So that you've got some people in the audience booing and some of them throwing roses. That would be great. (155)

In Ludwick's vision, theatre becomes a common ground for communication and debate, not just between the performers and the spectators, but also among the theatre-goers themselves. Theatre becomes the location for the creation of a community.

Conni Massing notes that she had a clearer understanding of the audience for her work and a closer connection to them when she produced plays at the Fringe. In response to my question "Do you have a sense of who is drawn to your work?", she says,

> I used to have a better idea when I did more things at the Fringe. Because then you would see your audience every day. It's a very peculiar event in that respect. I would see who was lined up to see my play, and I would end up talking to them and seeing how many of them there were and what they looked like and how old they were. And then I would see them all the rest of the week, because they were at the Fringe too and we would run into each other and I'd find out exactly what they thought of it. You seldom have that opportunity to have that direct survey of your audience. I was probably more in touch with it there than anywhere else because of the nature of the Fringe. It's more of an open marketplace. Instead of Stan and

> Edna saying, "Well it's Wednesday and it's our night to go to Theatre Network. What are we seeing anyways?" (116)

Festivals such as the Fringe perhaps offer lessons for the traditional professional theatre community. Attendance at Fringe festivals have increased yearly while a survey conducted by the Council for Business and the Arts found that "audiences for the performing arts in Canada dropped by seven per cent in 1989-90."[38] Although this drop in attendance can be partly attributed to the recession, the Canadian Arts Consumer Profile also offers a clue as to why these people aren't going to the theatre, aside from economic restraints. The report states: "Of the factors influencing decisions about whether to go to a performance, both the general public and audience respondents ranked the 'piece being performed' as the most important factor."[39] Clearly, this indicates that audience members are more interested in attending a specific play than going to a specific theatre. Given this statement, it is questionable whether subscription seasons are as likely to attract new theatre-goers. As Patricia Ludwick explains, "I've noticed that the regular theatre community bemoan the fact that people go to festivals and then don't buy season tickets. I think maybe they're missing the point here. Maybe our style of life has changed. Maybe we need more festivals and fewer seasons of plays that people have to buy ahead of time." (155)

The success of Fringe festivals in Canada is due in a large part to their understanding of their audience and their ability to place the audience at the centre of the event. Fringes have accurately gauged many people's desire for event, choice, and flexibility. They have taken theatre out of regular theatre spaces that often carry an implication of "high art", and transferred performance to warehouses, make-shift theatres and the street. As Erika Paterson suggests in her article on the Fringe in *Canadian Theatre Review*'s issue on "New Theatre/New Voices", the Fringe audience can be called "the self-determined audience" or "an empowered audience":

> The audience is also a major performer in the process of artistic innovation and creation, not only by virtue of word of mouth with each other; they are also outstandingly vocal in their response to the artists' work both in and out of the theatre spaces. As well, much of the strategies behind the cultural politics of the Festivals are measured and shaped around the size and behavior of the audience. This is a dynamically influential and hence powerful audience. Or perhaps it is better put to refer to the Fringe audience as an empowered audience. I say this because I per-

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[38]"'Financial Hole' Swallowing Arts as Audiences Dwindle, Survey Finds," Vancouver Sun 22 Aug. 1991: C4.
[39]Harris D1.

> ceive theatre audiences in general to be disempowered, which, if you think about it, is a rather fascinating contradiction. Canadian theatre audiences are not typically disempowered people; their economic and social positions align them with the dominating classes (they are predominantly upper-income and over-educated, or on their way to becoming so). Hence to consider theatre audiences of this type as disempowered is difficult - until one measures the kinds of influence they have, or rather do not have, on their theatre and ultimately their culture.[40]

Paterson suggests that one of the reasons Fringe-goers are more empowered is that they have eliminated the role of the critic. While this is debatable, especially when one considers that reviewers at the Edmonton Fringe wield a great deal of "consumer clout", Paterson's idea is intriguing:

> The Fringe audience's enthusiastic response to, and outspoken support of, this rejection of agreed-upon "artistic" standards can be translated as a rejection of a fundamental operating principle of cultural politics in this country, "the criteria of excellence" - a rejection of the authority of the critic/academic, and essentially a rejection of the appropriation and institutionalization of theatre in the interest of "fine" art.[41]

Paterson has introduced an important point. The Fringe, at least at its inception, tempered the authority of the critic and offered "Fringers" the ability to judge the merit of the performance for themselves and debate their point of view with other festival-goers in the beer tent or while standing in line. Although many Fringe productions are now at the mercy of media coverage and "a good review" to draw audiences, Fringe Festival programmes usually encourage spectators to share their own opinions with their fellow theatre-goers. Here, the Fringe has taken a crucial cue from post-modern theory. Recent performance theorists, including Dolan, suggest that we need to modify the audience member's relationship to the theatrical experience so that meaning is constructed by each spectator rather than by the artist. This proposal represents a radical shift in our understanding of the spectator's role in the theatrical experience. The "ideal" spectator is eliminated and replaced by multiple spectators who are asked to use their particular perspectives in viewing a performance and being part of a larger group called "the audience". However, this revision in philosophy must be backed up by practical changes in our methods of theatrical production. "Empowering" the spectator perhaps means changing the role of the critic. Many of the playwrights in these interviews felt that reviewers were often untrained, unaware of the influence their personal perspectives had on their response, and saw themselves as either "consumer guides" or "interpreters of

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[40]Erika Paterson, "The Self-Determined Audience," Canadian Theatre Review 67 (Summer 1991): 49-50.

[41]Paterson 50.

meaning" for the uninformed and possibly confused theatre-goer. If we are to offer spectators a larger stake in a cultural partnership, we need to find ways to facilitating, rather than eliminating, debate. We must be prepared to look outside the traditional professional theatre at innovations such as the Fringe for new ways to lessen the gap between artist and audience member.

It is important to note that Fringe festivals do not present a solution in themselves. They often throw the artist into a low-priced market economy without any support. Although many artists, such as Patricia Ludwick, welcome the opportunity to self-produce, few make little more than beer money. As Patricia Ludwick explains, sooner or later it becomes impossible to do:

> You have to produce it yourself, and after a certain number of years of asking your friends to work for you for nothing, I start going, "Oh, gosh, I really can't do this, I've got to pay everybody at least a little bit." But then it becomes a real risky proposition. You put out a lot of money to the Fringe producers to get a venue, and you do all your own publicity, and you compete with all those other people. So it goes back to the market economy, and if it's got sex in the title and a lot of silly jokes, it's more likely to get people in. (154)

She continues later, explaining,

> I don't mind a bit going on and talking endlessly on radio programs or to local reporters who don't really know what you're talking about. Anything to get the word out. Although I'm really tired of putting up posters, asking permission to put them in shops. You know, how long do I keep doing that? Is it worth it? Do I get enough back? You know, mental and spiritual food from doing this kind of work? And at this point I don't. (165)

As Ludwick points out, despite the freedom of self-producing, in the "mall" economy of the Fringe, real experimentation is often discouraged by the success of other shows who employ sensationalistic means to draw audiences.

Although Fringes do not provide all of the answers, we must find ways of bringing new perspectives to the theatre, either, as Wallace suggests, by appealing to their particular qualities, or by opening the regular season to a wider range of people. Wallace's proposed theatre of particularism is a valuable starting point, if we recognize that geography is also a particular quality and can link audience members who are otherwise very different.

Theatre's ability to happen in a particular place provides the means to collectively discover who we are and what binds us, even if we discover that the only thing linking us is the common space. In the future, physical geography will play an increasingly important role in developing a cultural partnership. In our age of globalization, particularity and geography have both become essential to the renewal of identity. In a speech entitled "Facing the Cultural Challenge - Canada in the 1990's", Allan Gotleib, the Chair of the Canada Council, says, "I believe the world is going to see the rapid acceleration of two existing trends, not fully compatible with each other: one towards universalism, the other towards particularism."[42] He explains that "communications and information technology is battering down the walls of national sovereignty." In Gotleib's analysis, high-powered communications has enabled the creation of a universal software for entertainment that is largely American but which sees "fewer and fewer products, fewer and fewer programs, instantaneous in their impact and more and more dense, spread wider and wider into every corner of the globe." He says, "The programming that dominates the electronic roads, the material that the satellite beams directly into homes, becomes ever more similar and ever more reductive." In response to these trends, Gotleib suggests that countries and regions have begun to invest great significance in particularity. He says,

> The truth of the matter is that this urge towards particularism is very understandable, even inevitable. The forces that are creating transnational corporate entities of vast proportions, and international technological culture and a growing parallelism of life styles, are also driving the engines of particularism - the need to identify oneself, to reinforce one's identity, to know who one is and who one's children will be.

For Gotleib, particularism becomes the only means to a national identity. He says, "At this extraordinarily difficult juncture in the country's history, when Canadians are suffering from divisiveness, deep uncertainty and a sense of dislocation, Canada - now more than ever before - needs to see itself, in its many different parts, in the artist's mirror." Gotleib's use of the word "dislocation" is apt and brings us back to Jana's analysis of Canadian culture in *Odd Fish.* Jana says, "there are miles and miles and miles of Canada out there that think poets and sculptors are something out of story books....story books written in Europe."[43] Boyd herself says, "The very fact that we judge our artists by whether or not they're accepted abroad is a bad sign. We don't

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[42]Allan Gotleib, "Facing the Cultural Challenge - Canada in the 1990's," Annual Convention of the Central Canadian Broadcasters' Association, Toronto, 25 June 1991. Copies of this speech were made available by the Canada Council to its clients.

[43]Boyd.

know enough about ourselves or our own culture to say whether we think it's good or not, or relevant or not." (72) Boyd suggests that our culture is dislocated, and these interviews warn that it may become increasingly so, beginning within the regions. In response to the inability for their work to create their audience, many playwrights have responded to Central Canadian forces and begun to deny their own environment and their own gender. Artists need to embrace themselves and the place they have called "home" and help to create a theatrical community in which the audience member plays an important part. As Barbara Sapergia explains, "I think you have to do a good thing where you are, have the highest standards that you possibly can, but to measure yourself against another place I find really destructive and pointless." (107)

Ultimately, Wallace's call for a theatre of particularism accurately assesses the direction Canadian culture needs to take in a world where international airwaves are are controlled by the American entertainment industry. However, Wallace's Central Canadian perspective and inability to look beyond the borders of Mississauga contributes to the pressure placed on "regional" playwrights to produce "universal" work. The road to universalism, they are told, is not found in the specificity of their own particular world, but in deleting references to who they are and where they live. Through a closer examination of our methods of criticism and theatrical production, we need to encourage and enable playwrights to embrace gender and geography and all of the other signposts that locate them on our cultural map. It is in enabling artists to define themselves that we become able to distinguish the identity not only of the West, but of all of Canada. As Allan Gotleib, chair of the Canada Council states in the Council's 1990-91 edition of their annual report: "without culture, without the arts, a country is a mere name in a geography book, a voiceless, faceless population, living inside boundaries that are only abstract measurements."[44]

Furthermore the Canadian Arts Consumer Profile shows that "two-thirds of the respondents say they would like to go out more often."[45] In addition, "the highest number of respondents - 66 per cent - said they would like to attend more concerts or performances..."[46] Although people are interested in and willing to attend more live perfor-

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[44]The Canada Council, 4.
[45]Christopher Harris, "Popcorn May be Wrong, Report Suggests," The Globe and Mail 29 May 1992: D1.
[46]Harris D1.

mance, including those who do not currently attend the theatre, somehow attendance at the professional theatres has dropped.

Methodology and Editorial Procedures

In the final year of course work for my Master's degree, I undertook, with three other students, a bibliography project partly designed to help develop possible thesis topics. The bibliography documented plays by and criticism about women in the Canadian theatre. In the process, we discovered a striking lack of primary material on women who work in the theatre. In developing a thesis topic, I wanted to combine my two interests in women's writing and the Canadian theatre and to address the lack of primary material documenting the work and experience of women writing for the theatre in Canada.

Originally, I envisioned an interview project that would encompass both French and English Canadian women playwrights. After initial research I decided it would be more fruitful to limit the project to only English Canadian women. Finally, after discovering that Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much were in the process of editing and eventually publishing their collection of interviews with English Canadian women playwrights, I decided, in contrast to their project, to adopt a tighter focus of Western Canadian women who were writing for the theatre. I hoped that this focus would proffer more specific and ultimately better research.

After a period of reading plays, researching productions and talking to various theatre professionals, I wrote to approximately twenty playwrights, asking for their participation in my project. I tried for as broad a representation as possible: I wanted to interview those who had found a degree of success as well as those who had received less critical attention; those who were no longer writing for the theatre as well as those who were currently writing for the theatre. I defined "the West" as including the Prairie provinces and British Columbia, but also decided to interview those writers who had left the West and were now living and writing in Toronto. Finally, in the summer of 1990, I interviewed fourteen women in the following order: Beverley Simons, Peggy Thompson, Patricia Ludwick, Joan Mason Hurley, Sharon Stearns, Joan MacLeod, Joanna Glass, Sally Clark, Pamela Boyd, Conni Massing, Ruth Smillie, Barbara Sapergia, Connie Gault, and Maureen Hunter. I began in British Columbia, flew to Toronto, returned to Edmonton and worked my way across the Prairie provinces. Unfortunately, my finances prevented me from travelling to Halifax to interview Wendy Lill, who had left Winnipeg for the Maritimes. I also regret that for various reasons I was unable to interview Rose Scollard, who works with Meanad Theatre in Calgary and consciously writes about the experiences of women, and Maria Campbell and Margo Kane who both offer a native perspective on writing for the theatre.

Prior to the first set of interviews in British Columbia, I sent each playwright a letter detailing the focus of the project and a list of possible questions and topics that I wanted to discuss. My initial questions centred mainly on how gender and region had shaped their experience of writing for the theatre, including their process of writing, their understanding of their audience, and their relationship to the theatre community.

In the next set of interviews, those in Toronto, I decided not to send each playwright a list of interview questions. I felt that many of the writers in British Columbia had prepared their answers in advance and may have subsequently censored immediate reactions to the questions. In contrast, in Toronto I only explained the exact nature and subject of the project at the top of the interview. Although this process did elicit more spontaneous response, some of the interviews lacked focus.

Finally, I combined the two approaches in interviewing the Prairie writers. Prior to each interview I sent the playwright a longer letter detailing the project and the kinds of subjects that I wanted to broach. They did not receive a list of interview questions. In gen-

eral, the nature of the project did not change. I continued to describe it as an exploration into the experience of Western Canadian women writing for the theatre. However, the questions began to focus less on the impact gender and region had on their work, and more on their work and on their specific experience with new play development. I had sensed a great deal of resistance to questions focusing on gender and region, and tried to cushion their presence by providing a subsidiary focus.

My approach to interviewing was originally influenced by feminists working in this field who suggested that the interview form, that of a dialogue, could represent a more democratic means of criticism. I tried to ensure that I did not become the "absent" presence typical of edited television interviews, and that the playwrights also had the ability to discuss issues that were important to them.

In the process of conducting the interviews I became increasingly fascinated by the effect geography and time had on the conversations. Following each interview, I tried to record a description of where and when the conversation took place. I felt that these contexts for the interviews often illuminated something about the playwrights, their work, or the conversation itself. These impressions formed the basis for the brief descriptions which precede each transcript.

The editing process spanned two years. In its initial stages I transcribed the interviews word for word, trying faithfully to maintain each writer's speech patterns. In the first edit, I cut very little: repetitions which made sentences hard to understand, extraneous expressions such as "um", and breaks in the interview where the playwright had to answer the door or phone. In the second edit, completed almost a year after the first edit, I made major cuts and adjustments in order to provide a greater focus and coherency to the collection as a whole. In general, I kept all material which related to their experience or process of writing for the theatre in Canada. This included material that dealt with gender, region, audience, funding and community. I eliminated much of the material that dealt solely with individual plays and cut any personal references that I felt violated their privacy. I also emended grammar and speech patterns for the purposes of clarity, but tried to maintain the sense and flavor of each writer's individual rhythm of speech. Similarly, I tightened up many of my own questions in an attempt to provide clearer "sign-posts" for the potential reader as they browsed through the collection. In no case did I change the essence of my questions. However, in the interview with Beverley Simons, I moved one section of her interview to a previous section in the interest of providing a more cohesive flow. Finally, the collection underwent a lighter third and fourth edit which continued to emend grammar and omit redundancies. To provide the reader with a sense of how much text was edited from the interviews and where it was cut, I have marked my edits with the following: three dots (...) at the beginning of a sentence, in the middle of a sentence, or at the end of a sentence indicates that part of the sentence has been omitted; four dots (....) at the end of a sentence indicates that one or more sentences have been cut before the beginning of the next sentence; and three dots (...) on a single line represents a sizable amount of text which has been eliminated.

In addition to editing individual interviews, I also eliminated three interviews from the collection for various reasons. I did not include the interviews with Joan Mason Hurley, Ruth Smillie and Sally Clark. The interview with Hurley, who writes almost exclusively for amateur theatre contests and festivals, did not fit well with a collection documenting the experience of the professional playwright. I excluded the interview with Smillie because her interest and experience in theatre ultimately lay more in directing than writing. Only a small portion of my conversation with her articulated the perspective of a writer rather than a director. And finally, the interview with Sally Clark was very short. I had

not sent her a list of the interview questions prior to the interview, and I had great difficulty matching the focus of our conversation to the focus of the project.

Finally, the introduction which precedes the collection is an attempt to provide a framework for discussing all of the interviews. This framework was one that suited my interests and seemed to have a broad and immediate relevance to Canadian theatre at this point in time. However, in writing the introduction and in editing the interviews, I hoped to maintain the project's original goal: to collect primary material which would document the work and experience of women writing for the theatre in Western Canada, and which would serve other critics and theatre professionals in their search for provocative and reliable information. The introduction included in this collection focuses on one aspect of the interviews. I believe there are many other subjects and issues raised by the material which bear further study and comment by other students and academics working in this field or on specific playwrights. In particular, the collection offers insight into processes of professional play development, the importance the theatre community plays in the development of a writer, and the work, philosophy and writing process of each individual playwright.

In conclusion, I also hope this project lends credence to the interview form as both a valuable tool and form of theatre criticism. The theatre critic and the theatre professional are often so segregated that dialogue between the two can be rare. In the spirit of creating a more integrated climate for Canadian theatre and Canadian theatre criticism, I hope these conversations foster further conversation and debate.

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JOAN MACLEOD grew up in Vancouver. She received her B.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Victoria , and her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. In 1985 MacLeod abandoned poetry for theatre, and Vancouver for Toronto. She joined the Tarragon Playwright's Unit in 1986, and was offered an ongoing residency with Tarragon a year later. MacLeod says the residency provided her with "a sense of home for the first time in Toronto," and explains that it "was crucial to my development as a playwright.[1]" Since 1987, her plays have been produced in major theatres across the country, including Neptune Theatre in Halifax, Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, The Grand Theatre in London, The Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, Theatre Calgary in Calgary, The Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver and The Belfry Theatre in Victoria. *Amigo's Blue Guitar* won the 1991 Governor General's Award for Drama. Her latest play *The Hope Slide* was performed at the Tarragon Theatre in the spring of 1992. Currently, MacLeod is working as a librettist on an opera.

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[1] Joan MacLeod, "Residencies Offer Isolation Cure," CanPlay April, 1989: 17.

I talked with Joan MacLeod in her small white apartment in metro Toronto near Honest Ed's. Suburban met urban as apartments and stores fell into identical red brick houses behind trees and streetlamps. Inside the apartment, her air conditioner offered relief from the thirty degree heat outdoors. Although inflicted by a summer cold and borderline laryngitis, MacLeod told me about her community in Toronto, her attachment to the West, and her love of spending the summer in Banff.

Lise Ann Johnson: *Why do you write?*

Joan MacLeod: It's what I've always wanted to do since I was a little kid. So I studied. I studied creative writing in Victoria and Vancouver. I always wanted to be a novelist or a poet. I didn't know anything about theatre until five years ago, when I was thirty, and that's when I discovered that my work was better out loud. That sort of changed everything for me in terms of what I write. I don't have a choice in the matter. It's just sort of what I do, and what I do to keep sane. Yes. It's been that way since I was a little kid. I love telling stories and writing stuff down. So, I sort of learned all about writing by writing a novel that wasn't published, and reading poetry, and studying those forms.

I came to theatre not knowing very much about it, which I think in my case was almost helpful. I found with this last play, *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, I really understood what pleased an audience. When I wrote *Jewel* and *Toronto, Mississippi* - which I wrote sort of simultaneously; they premiered at Tarragon just four months apart - I didn't know about any of that stuff. Now I have a better idea of how one-liners work and how humour works and how the structures of plays work. Some of that's really useful to me technically, and some of it's really deadly for the kind of writing I do, which is very human stuff from the gut.

Johnson: *Knowing too much about the mechanics of writing can be limiting?*

MacLeod: I think you start to get in trouble when you try to please people. Whether that's an audience or the critics or artistic directors. Or wanting to get plays picked up again or that kind of stuff. The kind of plays I write are really character based. That's what I do best. They're not plotted. I think I can tell a good story, I think that's important to any play, but the strong part of my plays is the characters. Remaining true to them means not trying to please people. I mean there's a balance there. I think that's part of the reason that my work in my twenties, my prose and poetry, wasn't successful. I didn't write with other people in mind hardly at all. You know, everything was sacred and came from me. So, there's a balance there.

Johnson: *How did audiences respond to Jewel?*

MacLeod: ....Something about it works. Certainly women really really respond to it. In fact, it's the piece that I've gotten the most mail from, even though my other two plays were bigger hits. It was aired on CBC radio. Especially when it was done on the radio, I got a lot of mail from women all over the country. There seems to be something about it that they really respond to.

Johnson: *Mostly women?*

MacLeod: Yeah, it's a very female piece.

Johnson: *What makes your work theatrical? I really love the language and the images that you get through language.*

MacLeod: The images are very visual in my work. So that probably helps. I try to remain true to character, which means that they're telling the truth. There's something theatrical about that. I was testing the waters last night with the character that I created. [MacLeod read from her play-in-progress at a cabaret held as part of the duMaurier World Stage Festival.] Some parts of it worked and some didn't work, but I came home last night feeling good about her voice and that people believed in the voice and that she could talk about stuff forever. I felt that there was something truthful about that. And when you're telling the truth, it's theatrical.

Johnson: *Is that how you write? Do you find the character first?*

MacLeod: Yeah. That's often how I start to write a play. I'll write monologues for characters. *Toronto, Mississippi* started that way. Actually, it's something that Urjo Kareda, who is head of Tarragon, gets all of us to do when we're in the Playwrights Unit. We take on six writers every year and get them to write a play.

That's how I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi*. Urjo will find the weakest character, and get you to write a monologue for that character.... When I did a monologue for *Toronto, Mississippi*, it was for Bill. Originally Bill had been gay, and I thought the play would be about this new kind of family: single mother and gay man. And of course the play wasn't that at all. I discovered writing the monologue that Bill was straight and sort of in love with Maddie. It just changed everything: made the stakes much higher in the play. Part of the monologue is still in the play. It's the end of the third scene, when he's telling Jhanna "don't shut down". It's still there. It grew out of that.

Johnson: *I was looking at an interview with Judith Thompson and she was talking about writing in quite a similar way.*

MacLeod: We're both playwrights-in-residence. She was a playwright-in-residence when I was in the Playwrights Unit. Out of my term in the Unit, I got a residency which is ongoing. So we shared an office. She wrote *I am Yours* and I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi*. Influences going back and forth!

Johnson: *When I was reading* Toronto, Mississippi, *I was struck by the contrast between King, the Elvis impersonator; and Bill, the Canadian poet who's sold 37 copies of his book* Paths of Despair. *You seem to poke fun at it all.*

MacLeod: Including myself. I feel that I can make fun of Bill because I'm also a poet. Yeah, I did have a lot of fun with that. I think since coming to theatre, I've understood how humour works a lot better. It's a real big part of my work. Because my prose and poetry weren't funny at all. Yeah, I had fun with all of that stuff and about how serious and introspective a writer I was.

In *Toronto, Mississippi* too, I wanted to look at romance and why women go after someone so self-destructive as King. Why there's something about him that is still really glittery, and why there's something about Bill that isn't. I had a great time writing about that. I love writing men. My work is very female but I like writing male characters....

Bill is very strong. too. He's very loving of Jhanna and I think that's what helps make him powerful. Probably the best scenes in the play are the ones between the two

of them. They really work. I did a workshop of it in Banff. I was working on it at the Playwright's Colony just before it premiered here. We did a public reading. In the bathroom during the intermission, all the women poets from the Poet's Colony, which runs at the same time, were saying that Bill was the sexiest character they had discovered in Canadian literature. I thought that was great.

...

Johnson: *Maddie, as well as the character in* Jewel, *seems to be rooted in every day life. Do you think that's one of the reasons that women seem to respond to your work?*

MacLeod: Maybe. Updike or one of those guys said that enough happens in one day to write about for the rest of your life. Although there are big events around my plays, whether it's the Ocean Ranger or Elvis Presley or whatever, there's part of them that is very day-to-day, and insightful about the way people relate on a day-to-day basis and how family works.

Johnson: *And how to go from one day to the next. Which is what* Jewel *seems to be about.*

MacLeod: I guess part of that is female. That sense of home and the world operating in a small place. So much of my work is about family. Yeah. I don't know.

...

Johnson: *I thought it was interesting that in the interview you did with Rita Much, she called the setting of* Jewel *"exotic"*[1].

MacLeod: You're from Alberta. It is exotic to a Toronto audience. Even Conologue from The Globe and Mail called it "sub-culture" and "the frontier". I've spent a lot of time in the North. I think more Western Canadians have. Kids like me who grew up in Vancouver, we'd go up to Fort St. John for the summer, or Whitehorse. Part of that's really Western.

Johnson: *Is that a good indication of how audiences in Toronto responded?*

MacLeod: Yeah, they did think it was exotic. Something they weren't used to at all. *Amigo's Blue Guitar* is set on a Gulf Island on the West Coast. They thought that was pretty exotic too. It's funny how that works. *Toronto, Mississippi* is really my only urban work. I wrote it the first year I lived here. Toronto was very exotic to me. Everything was new.

Johnson: *How does the appeal of a play like* Jewel *change if you take it to Peace River or even to Edmonton?*

MacLeod: That's a good question. I don't think the appeal itself changes. It seems to have worked wherever it's done.

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[1] Joan MacLeod is interviewed in Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much's Fair Play: 12 Women Speak. (Simon & Pierre: Toronto, 1990). In the interview, Rita Much comments: "The situation and the location [of *Jewel*] are both very exotic, very removed from the ordinary." (p. 198)

Johnson: *It provokes a very emotional response.*

MacLeod: On Valentine's night this year, it was done in Sweden. It's been done in Denmark and East Berlin. I love that a play that takes place in a trailer in Northern Alberta makes sense to people in Copenhagen. Again, to go back to this, I'm sounding like a fanatic, but a character who speaks the truth and speaks simply, crosses all kinds of regional lines.

I did a reading tour in the Kootenays in B.C. this year. I read a lot of parts from *Jewel* and they loved it. They loved the bush stuff. They like it that their world is being written about. And I toured Northern B.C. last fall. A lot of people came to the reading. Usually on the reading tour they're getting a poet from Toronto. You know, people who don't write about their world. People love that, they like having their own backyard explained. It's important that people know that writers are not just writing about urban angst or something. They're writing about something that they understand.

Johnson: *So in one setting it's the familiar, and in the other setting it's the exotic?*

MacLeod: That's right. Yeah, exactly. That's a good way to look at it.

Johnson: *Do you think some plays work better in Vancouver than in Toronto and vice versa?*

MacLeod: Let me think about this. My plays have done well in Toronto. This is the first place I've had success as a writer, so I feel like I really have to defend the place. My work seems to really work here. *Toronto, Mississippi* seemed to do okay when it was done here. I mean no one said it was an overnight sensation or anything like that. The reviews were okay, the box office was okay. Nothing phenomenal. The response to it outside Toronto has been terrific. It's had nine productions in the last two years. The first theatres to pick it up were Western theatres. It got picked up by Vancouver, by Victoria, by Kamloops. So that there's something in my work that Westerners respond to. Martin [Kinch, then the Artistic Director of Theatre Calgary] in Calgary picked it up a year later. And the same thing happened with *Amigo's Blue Guitar*. It got picked up in the West just like that. So there is something.

Johnson: *Do you know what it is?*

MacLeod: I'm a real Westerner. I mean my perception of things is not Toronto gal at all. It's partly what I was saying about kids from Vancouver who go and work up north in the summer. I spent two years in Fort St. John. Kids in Vancouver grow up understanding the country better than a kid in Toronto would. I mean they have cottage country here and all that, but it's very different. In B.C., you can be in a place that's very wild and remote and only about twenty minutes from the city, and that gets into my work. Nature and geography and all that stuff is a big part of my work, particularly in my last play. I don't know. What else makes it Western? I'm not sure.

Johnson: *It's difficult to pin down.*

MacLeod: I think Vancouver is the hardest place in the country to premiere a play.

Johnson: *Why?*

MacLeod: Because people just don't go to theatre in the same way. I mean I feel responsible for that too. I never went to the theatre when I lived in Vancouver. I went about four times. In Toronto, going to the theatre is like going to a movie. It's just

something that people do during the week. I know there's some of that in Edmonton too. In Vancouver, it's just not that way. Theatre's just not a big deal.

For example, *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Jewel* opened in Vancouver at the same time. When I have a play premiere here in Toronto, I'm interviewed to death. For this last one I did thirty five interviews. I did all this PR. In Vancouver, I didn't have anything to do. It's not a big deal. And I'm a local girl who's come home, it was my first stuff being done at home. When Larry Lillo, who runs the Playhouse, went home a few years ago to take over that job, he was on the cover of *Georgia Strait* [Vancouver's local arts paper], and it had been the first time that they had had a local person on the cover in two years. Here, I was on the cover of *Metropolis* when *Amigo's* opened. *Now Magazine* features local artists all the time. Local art is a big deal. In Vancouver, local theatre is not a big deal. For our first preview of *Toronto, Mississippi*, there were six people in the audience. Our first week, our box office was 20% or something. And it got good reviews. So it's really difficult. Theatre isn't a part of the town the way it is here. There's not a theatre community the way there is here. And that's really hard. My heart goes out to the people that are there doing it: the acting pool, the directors. They're really, really talented and they have it really, really tough.

Johnson: *Do you think Vancouver audiences like different things than Toronto audiences?*

MacLeod: ...Who knows how to tell what works in one city and not the other. Hopefully the plays are strong enough to work anywhere. *Toronto, Mississippi* has been done in Victoria [at The Belfry], and Halifax [at The Neptune]; in a small theatre in Thunder Bay [Magnus Theatre], and in a huge theatre in London, Ontario [The Grand Theatre]. There's something about it that people connect to. Same thing with *Jewel*, I think. And *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, touch wood, hopefully the same thing is going to happen. Because again, it got picked up by Theatre Calgary, which is a big urban place, and then by The Belfry in Victoria, which wants to tour it to the Gulf Islands. That would be great. I hope it works out. Who knows what will happen? *Amigo's* is a real West Coast play. I'm very curious to see how they respond to it there. There's a lot of references to Vancouver. It's just West Coast all the way. It couldn't be set anywhere else. So we'll see how Vancouver likes it when it's their own back yard. We'll see if it makes a difference. Originally, the first theatre I talked to in Vancouver about doing *Toronto, Mississippi* wanted to change the title. They didn't want to do something with "Toronto" in the title. All that paranoia about Toronto. And rightly so. I lived outside Toronto for thirty years, and people do hate the place and think everything happens here. It's very difficult. And Toronto people do think it's the centre of the world. It's hard.

Johnson: *Is it mostly the audiences that are different or is it the whole theatre system?*

MacLeod: It's partly the theatre system. When I moved to Toronto, I was taken under wing by the Tarragon, who had this Playwright's Unit. The first money that I ever received as a professional artist was an Ontario Arts Council grant, to be a playwright-in-residence. There's no equivalent in B.C.. Here, the theatres will match Canada Council dollars with provincial dollars. And in Alberta, I know that funding for the arts is pretty good.

In B.C., there's nothing. I never received a penny as a professional artist in B.C.. It never dawned on me that I could write full time. That's just something I didn't think about. It's very hard to be a professional playwright or a professional anything in B.C., because there's just not the support financially and there's not the support audience wise. Art is not a part of the community the way it is here. Partly because it's so beautiful. As I say, I feel responsible for that because I didn't go to the theatre either. You live

in Vancouver because you can hop on a ferry and be in the middle of nowhere, or drive up a mountain, or backpack. It is changing. People are starting to hang out downtown more. But it's still pretty tough. Provincial funding is really important. I think that's a real problem. And things like, the first place I sent *Jewel* was to the New Play Centre. They had a reading fee of $25 or $45. I didn't have any money. They still have a reading fee, which I really disagree with. I think that's insulting to writers. I wasn't interested in it at all. And then I sent it to Expo '87. I thought, "This is local stuff, it's real cheap to put on." I think it was three months after Expo was over, I got a reject letter addressed Dear Mr. MacLeod. So that's frustrating.

Johnson: *It's not just the money and it's not just the audience. You need a space to put on a play. You need a theatre that's going to do it.*

MacLeod: My experience with Touchstone Theatre in Vancouver is one of the best theatre experiences I've ever had. It was a great production. Their priorities are really in the right place. They were terrific. Really good cast, really good production values. And eventually they did get people out to the theatre. Word of mouth means a lot in Vancouver, and people did end up really supporting the play. So I don't mean to sound totally bitter. I'm just saying it's really tough there. It's way tougher than it is here.

I'm also very, very lucky in that I'm still a playwright-in-residence at Tarragon, and that they still want to premiere my work. I've also been so lucky with *Toronto, Mississippi* because it's been picked up so much that this is my third year living off the royalties of that play. So I don't have the financial constraints that most playwrights have at all. I get to write whatever I want and the theatre that I work at supports that. I'm able to pay the rent and that makes me luckier than most writers in the country. I'm really aware of that. A lot of it is luck. There's an appeal with *Toronto, Mississippi* that I know is there. It's done really well. I feel fortunate because there are plays that are as well or better written, but don't get nine productions. I know that. So, we'll see.

But good for places like Theatre Calgary or The Grand in London who picked up *Toronto, Mississippi*. Those are big regional theatres that in other seasons usually include Noel Coward and Neil Simon. I mean they don't have a clue who I am in Calgary. And it sold over 80%. I think audiences are ready for new work and they like having their own back yard defined for them. People are afraid to take risks, but Martha Henry picked it up at the Grand and it sold well for them, it did well for them. It's great that people will take those risks.

Johnson: *Are people in other cities more willing to take risks if they know that a play has done well in Toronto?*

MacLeod: I don't think so. I don't think how something does in Toronto makes that much difference. As I said, it was no big deal when it was done here. Martha, who picked it up quite quickly, hadn't seen the production. She had just read the play and wanted to do it. So good for her. It really, really helped me a lot, and I think once she had picked it up, the other big regionals got a bit more interested about it. If she can do it in London, which is quite a conservative town, then let's see what happens in Calgary or somewhere else. It's at MTC [Manitoba Theatre Centre] next year in Winnipeg. It goes on and on, which is really nice.

Johnson: *Having a play do well in Toronto could work the opposite. If people perceive it as "too Toronto", they might not want to do it.*

MacLeod: Certainly, having the word "Toronto" in the title doesn't make people want to touch it immediately. But that attitude also drives me nuts. Whatever.

Johnson: *I'm only going as far east as Toronto to talk to playwrights for this project. I can't afford to go any further, but most of the people from Western Canada who aren't writing there seem to be in Toronto anyway.*

MacLeod: Mmhmm, a lot of them. Sally [Clark] is the same age as me and we're both from Vancouver. She just lives on the next street. Who else? Bev Cooper is also from Vancouver but lives here now.

Johnson: *I find it interesting that many of the "Western Canadian" playwrights that are now living here are originally from Vancouver - Margaret Hollingsworth, for example - whereas it seems that women writing in the Prairie provinces are able to stay there. Saskatchewan apparently has a great playwright's group.*

MacLeod: And so does Winnipeg. All through the Prairie Provinces. In terms of fiction too. Way ahead of B.C. Poor old B.C. B.C. is a great place to live if you want to write in isolation. Get your place on Galliano [one of the Gulf Islands] or something like that. It's wonderful. If you work in theatre, that can't work all the time. Part of you needs to live in a city, at least for part of the year, and work with other people, and go to other shows, and all that kind of thing.

Johnson: *I talked to four writers in British Columbia. The two that lived in Vancouver had given up writing for the theatre [Beverley Simons and Peggy Thompson]. The other two were writing in isolation: so the only two people who were still writing for the theatre were Patsy Ludwick, who lives on Gabriolla Island; and Sharon Stearns, who lives in a log cabin without indoor plumbing.*

MacLeod: All through my twenties I spent more than half my time living outside of cities. I love living in the country. I lived on the Gulf Islands, I lived up North, I lived in the Yukon. I always thought that if I could make it as a writer, I would move to the country right away. And then, when I got interested in theatre, I got interested in living in a great big city. If you had said to me six or seven years ago that I would be living right downtown Toronto and be a playwright - it would just seem impossible. Part of me likes it. If you're going to live in a city, then you may as well live in a great big one and you might as well live downtown.

Things like this apartment building: it's full of other artists and actors and writers. I love that kind of thing. Brooke Johnson, who was the original Jhanna in *Toronto, Mississippi* and who was also in my last play, her and her boyfriend David Fox, who is also a terrific actor, live right over there [MacLeod points down the hall]. Leslie Toy, who did *Jewel* in Vancouver, she lives on the third floor. Kenny Gardner, who has a show opening next Tuesday at the DuMaurier festival, he lives on the third floor. Michael McGuire, who's Sally Clark's cousin and a composer I'm working with, he lives on the second floor. So that stuff's great. I just never felt part of a writing community or an artistic community at all when I lived in the West. And I really like that. I like having an office at the Tarragon and being able to hang out there. Just the people that cross your path when you live in that kind of atmosphere, it's great. It's really nice.

I also get to leave Toronto a lot. I'm usually on the road at least three months of the year. And if I didn't get to do that I'd become really snakey. I go home at least three times a year, usually for a long time. Sometimes I'll go for a month, sometimes longer than that. Same thing this year. I'm going home mid-August and I'll be there until the middle of October.

Johnson: *It does seem important to have constant contact with other people, especially if you work in the theatre.*

MacLeod: I mean 90% of your job as a playwright is still "you by yourself" and you can do it anywhere. It's lonely and it's still hard. But in the other 10%, you're in rehearsal, you're with people. It's really intense and all these people are involved in your little project. So it's funny. It's funny how that works.

Johnson: *How does where you live affect what you write?*

MacLeod: After saying all of this - that I love living downtown and all of that - this is the first time in seven years that I haven't been at Banff this time of year. I started going there as a poet and a prose writer, and then I've been at the Playwright's Colony for the past three years. So this is the first time I haven't been there. It's the first time that I've been in Toronto in June. At Banff I always get an incredible amount of work done and have an incredible amount of fun. It's a great place. I do tend to really binge out when I get out of the city. I get a lot done. But, I mean, I can get a lot done here too. But if I have a first draft to do, and if I get out of the city and sort of cloister myself away, I can get a lot done. But that's a small part of the job. I did 6 drafts of *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's Blue Guitar*: I rewrite like crazy. It's really boring, tedious work. It's like being a mathematician basically. And that's a big part of the kind of writing that I do. It's not that creative wonderful stuff that you get to do in the beginning. So that's what I do when I'm in Toronto: I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite.

Johnson: *Does where you live weave into your plays?*

MacLeod: Where I live is always important to me. It's always a big deal. I'm so self-centred. There's been places that I've lived that are very magical to me. And I keep writing about them again and again: the Gulf Islands, Northern B.C., Southern Alberta. Those places are just charged for me. The Rocky Mountains. When I live in those places, I get a lot of work done. And they keep creeping up in my work, again and again.

Although there was something freeing about writing *Toronto, Mississippi*, about writing a play that took place in a city. Even though I've spent a lot of time in the country, I grew up in the city. But the literature I grew up on was Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, which turned my head around when I was eighteen or nineteen. I sort of grew up learning how to write pastoral. The metaphors in the literature I was reading were all "country". So my writing started doing the same thing. There's always been some romance around that. And so to write something that was set in the city scared me. I didn't feel like I had the language to do it. Which is stupid, because I know cities inside and out. That's where I spend a lot of time. So writing *Toronto, Mississippi* was great. It was a lot of fun. Because cities are exotic as well.

Johnson: *It's interesting that Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence are so widely read in Canada, yet our population is mostly urban. It seems to be part of Canadian mythology.*

MacLeod: And it is really significant that I had never written anything set in a city until I was 32 years old. I wasn't even conscious of that.

...

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of your audience, of who goes to your plays?*

MacLeod: Tarragon subscribers. Who goes to my plays? Tarragon's a real mixed-bag audience. Part of the subscribers are quite conservative and have been going there forever, but at the same time it's one of the main theatres in Canada for new work. They have a stake in new work and they're proud of that. Certainly the theatre community comes out to my work. We have "pay-what-you-can Sundays" at Tarragon. On the first Sunday that *Amigo's* was on, I walked up to the theatre and people were lined up around the block. It was such a great feeling. It was just wonderful. That's always my favourite show to go to because it feels like your peers. It feels like the theatre community and the arts community and students. We had incredible crowds on Sundays. We turned away hundreds of people. And that felt wonderful, it felt really great. So I don't know. Old people go. It's really mixed. I tend to get a lot of mail. Sixty year old widows who live in Rosedale will write me about *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, or someone from Amnesty International who wants to talk about the politics in the play. So it's a real mixed bag of people.

Johnson: *I read an interview with Kate Weiss in CTR who was quoted as saying, "We should blow up our theatres and be forced to work in public places."*[2] *If theatres blew up, where would you put your plays?*

MacLeod: Certainly the last one I would put on a Gulf Island somewhere. I don't know. That's a hard question. I don't want to blow up the theatres. It's funny. When I was home - I was out in B.C. for the month of April - it was a really hard time for me. My father died. It was sad, very sudden. Since I was there, I thought I'd go over to Victoria and talk to Glynis Leyshon who runs the Belfry Theatre in Victoria. Walking into the theatre - backstage and the offices - I just felt so at home. It was so comforting. It was wonderful. Because it was such a sad time, such a scattered time. There's just something about the theatre that always makes me feel at home.

Johnson: *Maybe the idea becomes irrelevant if you live in a city where people do go to the theatre. It's probably very significant that she works in B.C., where it's more difficult to get people out to see plays. It's interesting that your reaction was: "Why blow up the theatres?"*

MacLeod: We've had a tough season in Toronto. I'm not saying that it's really easy to put people in the seats, but it's so much easier than back there. Things like *Phantom [of the Opera]* and *Les Mis* are really hurting our community here.

Johnson: *Does it really take away people?*

MacLeod: I think it does. People go to those shows and get dazzled, who would never think of going to regular theatre. Hats off to Ed Mirvish. He produced *Les Mis* here and runs the Royal Alex. He's producing Thomson Highway's play [*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*] at the Royal Alex. It's part of their subscription season. And that's a conservative audience, a lot of rich old ladies go to that theatre. So it's terrific that he recognizes that new work can be that strong. It's a very strong play. It's something that's going to shake up subscribers there. And good for him. That's terrific. George Walker's *Love and Anger*, which was a big hit, is running in a big theatre now. So that's great. It's good that new work can cross that border, but it doesn't happen that much. I think if I was given that opportunity, if they ran *Toronto, Mississippi* at the

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[2]Peggy Thompson, "New Directions: An Interview with Kate Weiss," Canadian Theatre Review 59 (1989): 25.

Royal Alex, I think it would do well. I think people would like it. I think there's something about the play that works. But that opportunity usually isn't out there at all.

Johnson: *Are there dangers involved in putting something in the Royal Alex or in the St. Lawrence Centre? Does that change the work? Or does it just mean that people are finally taking the chance and letting audiences decide for themselves?*

MacLeod: I think that's what it means. *Toronto, Mississippi* played at Theatre Calgary. It's a great big snazzy theatre with a great big snazzy opening night audience with ladies in fur coats, and the play did great there. Two days later, I went to see it in Thunder Bay in a very small theatre [Magnus Theatre] and it did fine there too. There's something about the play that can stand up, no matter where it is. Hopefully. I feel very grateful to people like Martha Henry and Martin Kinch. And it turns out even better when those plays are risks for them and they do fine. It makes them go after the next one.

Johnson: *What about women writing for the theatre? In the* Fair Play *interview, you said that Nightwood Theatre rejected* Jewel *because it wasn't feminist enough*[3]*. Should there be another space for women who can't find acceptance in either the feminist or the mainstream spaces?*

MacLeod: To be fair to Nightwood, *Jewel* had sort of fallen through the cracks there. We had sort of started off on the wrong foot. Now they're friends of mine so that's all right. They have a feminist mandate and I think it's important that at least one theatre in town does. Last night [at the PUC cabaret], there were all those female playwrights onstage. That's unusual. That's not a reflection of how it works in the country at large. Most plays that are produced are still written by men and most theatres in this country are run by men. I can't find fault with that personally. My work's been done at most major theatres in Canada, so that hasn't gotten in my way, but it does get in the way sometimes. I know that. I think it's really important that Nightwood is out there. I don't think every theatre should have a mandate. I'm glad that Tarragon has a mandate for new work. It means that people like me get done. I'm glad that Nightwood has a feminist mandate because that means that we see things that normally wouldn't get done at all. Or Buddies in Bad Times, which is the gay theatre here. I think that kind of stuff is important.

Johnson: *There are always plays that are going to fall through the cracks.*

MacLeod: That's right. No matter what.

Johnson: *Part of getting produced is finding the place where your work fits?*

MacLeod: That's right. Tarragon and I get along like a house on fire, and that's accidental. The kind of writing I do and the kind of theatre they do just all went together really easily. So I feel very fortunate. And that's all I ever wanted: to be a writer in a supportive atmosphere. I feel really lucky.

Johnson: *Is it important for you to have that kind of immediate connection with your audience that you can get through theatre?*

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[3] Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much, Fair Play: 12 Women Speak, (Simon & Pierre: Toronto, 1990) 196. MacLeod is quoted as saying: "And [Nightwood] said it was good writing but that it wasn't their cup of tea because they felt it wasn't a feminist piece. And I felt really hurt by that."

MacLeod: Absolutely. It's great. Even trying out something new last night - having an audience - it informs everything. You get such a good idea of what works, what doesn't work. Yeah. It's essential.

...

Johnson: *Do you want to stay in Toronto?*

MacLeod: Yeah. For the time being anyway. This is home. I bought an air conditioner, so that means I'm staying. I just bought it a couple of weeks ago. But no, this is home now.

Johnson: *And if the theatre scene in B.C. were - ?*

MacLeod: The theatre in B.C. is certainly good to me right now. They're doing all my work. So no complaints. And Dennis Foon - who is a Vancouver writer and director - he directed my last play here. I really wanted someone from Vancouver to do it, and it was a really good idea. So I'm beginning to feel a sense of community with Vancouver. Certainly with Touchstone. I think they're a great company. The Arts Club is doing *Amigo's* and hopefully that's going to go great. So when I go to Vancouver I go to the Arts Club Thursday night bar. The theatre community sort of gets together and that feels nice. I'm starting to know more people and they seem to like what I do. I'm just not ready to move back yet.

Johnson: *Is that what it's all about, having a community?*

MacLeod: It's really important to me. I feel established in a community here that I like a lot and I just don't want to give it up. So we'll see. I can certainly see myself going to B.C. and spending a year there, but I'm just not ready to give up Toronto quite yet. I'll continue to go back and forth and spend a lot of time in B.C. That's never going to go away. That's where my family is. I'll always go back a lot.

Johnson: *It's always part of who you are.*

MacLeod: That's right. You continue to draw on that in your writing.

Johnson: *One of the writers I talked to suggested that you can only write about home when you have some distance from it.*

MacLeod: Which certainly was the case with *Amigo's Blue Guitar*. It really felt like the right time to set something on the West Coast. I have a more distant perspective on it right now. I also have it in my bones and in my blood and everything else. It's such a part of me.... The next play will probably take place in B.C. We'll see. I'll take my time. Financially, I'm able to take my time, which is a real blessing. I'm very lucky. I don't have to just pump them out and I don't want to. It took me two years to write *Amigo's Blue Guitar* and two years to write *Toronto, Mississippi*. That's a long time, but I'm a slow writer. I need that.

Johnson: *So this is the place to do it?*

MacLeod: Yeah. It's a good combination: to live here, and be able to go out to B.C. a lot, and be able to go to Banff, and be able to travel. I love traveling. So it seems to be working for me. For the meantime, I'm not going to change a thing.

JOANNA GLASS was born in Saskatoon in 1936. After graduating from high school, she moved to Calgary where she wrote advertising copy for radio and acted in the Dominion Drama Festival. On an Alberta provincial scholarship she attended the Pasadena Playhouse in California, and was briefly employed by Warner Brothers. By marrying an American physicist in 1959, Glass gave up her Canadian citizenship and became a citizen of the United States. In the early sixties, Glass began to raise three children. She and her family lived in New York City and Detroit, before settling in Guildford, Connecticut. In the late sixties, she began to write. Her first play *Santacqua* was completed in 1969. Glass wrote several plays in the seventies, including *Canadian Gothic, American Modern* and *Artichoke*. In 1976 *Artichoke* was picked up by so many American theatres, Glass became one of the most produced playwrights in the United States. Her marriage ended that same year. In 1977, she premiered *The Last Chalice* at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. Four years later, *The Last Chalice* was transformed into *Play Memory* on the strength of a Guggenheim Fellowship. *Play Memory* was first performed in Princeton and New York City in 1984 and subsequently produced in Saskatoon in 1986 and Toronto in 1987. Glass was considered for the Governor General's award for *Play Memory*, but was denied the award on the basis of her citizenship. Her latest play, *Yesteryear* was premiered in Toronto by Canadian Stage in 1989. Since then, Glass has resided in Toronto and is currently working on a new script entitled *Bodies of Thought*. She has reapplied for her Canadian citizenship.

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Interview with **JOANNA GLASS**, Monday, June 11, 1990

I interviewed Joanna Glass at her rented house near, but not in, downtown Toronto. Her street juts off from a Chinese strip selling odd vegetables and ceramic souvenirs, and reshapes itself into a quiet suburban neighborhood with kids in baseball caps selling chocolate almonds for their school. Inside, surrounded by refinished wood and New England fabric, we could have been in Maine or Connecticut. We sat in her living room and talked about nationalism, universality, and how it feels to fall between entities that exist for the most part in memory.

Lise Ann Johnson: *Something caught my eye in the* Fair Play *interview*[1]. *You say, "I'm really rather stretched right now, figuring out where I belong." And Rita Much responds, "It's a question you should be asked in a year or two when you are more settled into the Canadian theatre community.*[2]*" So, since it's probably been at least a year and a half since you did that interview, I can't resist asking the question: where do you belong at this point in time?*

Joanna McLelland Glass: It's a big subject. I was down there for thirty years with just occasional, brief trips back to Saskatoon. I raised my kids in the States. They are very American, and because of the ways in which we lived I got very involved in things that were very specifically American.... It's only been in the last two months, with my mounting concern about Meech Lake, that I've even really felt that I'm back. Yes, it's been really quite a hard adjustment for me. In fact, I didn't know how divorced I was. When I came up to write *Yesteryear* a couple of years ago, I didn't know any of the premiers of the provinces and I'd forgotten all about the NDP. In fact, it was the CCF in Saskatchewan when I left. I was so young. I was 18 when I left Saskatchewan and had no interest at all in politics....

So it's taking me much longer than I would have assumed, but it's because of my ignorance. I guess I didn't really think I'd sort of come up and just kind of fit in, but it is still taking me a long time. And there are things about Canada that are very frustrating. I think I probably mouthed off all together too much in the first six months. I was very defensive. There's a lot of blatant and latent anti-American feeling.

And then again, you see, I had never lived in the East. I went to the States as a Prairie kid. So there's a whole Eastern thing here. I became very ensconced in Eastern American things because the man I married did his PhD at Yale. After I divorced I moved back. I think of myself as a very North-East American. It's different here. There's that whole Rosedale thing that a lot of people speak of as if it's an impenetrable bastion. You don't run into that too much in the States. It's more assimilated, so there's also much more hope and belief that nothing is impenetrable. You just do the best you can and hope that it brings some success, and luckily, with me it did. I met up with great generosity down there and great kindness. In fact, in some of the more feminist leaning interviews that I've done, I never quite know what to say because I can't recall ever being treated badly because I was a woman. Male playwrights were having just as much difficulty.

There's a whole other thing here. When I had my first child in '63, I had been married for three years. It looked, at the time, that I would live in the States for the rest

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[1] An interview with Joanna Glass is included in Judith Rudakoff's and Rita Much's book Fair Play: 12 Women Speak . (Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1990) 105-126.

[2] Rudakoff 119.

of my life. In those days you couldn't take dual citizenship, so I did take out American citizenship. This has caused a very strange kind of rupture with things Canadian.

Johnson: *Do you feel like you have to justify yourself?*

Glass: Yes, well, this is why I said at the beginning that it's such a big subject. And of course you coming from the West, there's probably a regional aspect to it too. There's a sort of tight, repressed quality about a lot of what goes on around Toronto, but I haven't felt that there are really closed clubs. Quite frankly, I think it's a matter of staying here and showing your good intentions, and that takes time.

Johnson: *Is it important to have a group? I read a quote from you somewhere saying that theatre is collaborative and that it's important for playwrights to have the chance to put work up onstage and see what's right and what's wrong with it. To me, that says that it's important for people who want to work in theatre to have a group that they can work with.*

Glass: It is important, but it gets harder and harder to find. *Artichoke* was done at Tarragon many years ago, and I think *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern* were done in a very small theatre here in Toronto. And then three years ago, Malcolm Black at Theatre Plus did a very nice production of *Play Memory*. Then Bill Glassco invited me [to Canadian Stage] to do *Yesteryear*. So I mustn't in any sense complain, because it was hardly as if I came in off a freight train with a knapsack on my back.

Yesteryear was very successful financially. Of the three Toronto critics, Ray Conologue didn't care for it. But the other two reviews were very good. It's going to have, I think, a very good life in the States. In fact - I should hear in a couple of weeks - I think Cleveland Playhouse is going to do it this winter. My network is all still down there.

On the Canadian thing: twice in the last six or eight years, I have received invitations from the Canadian playwrights' union to join. When I said I was an American citizen, even though nearly all of the work is set in Saskatchewan and had been done a great deal in Canada, they would not accept me as a member, which I thought was very small. In New York, if you come in from Zimbabwe or wherever, you can join the Dramatists Guild.

Then I must say I was quite miffed and probably hurt - after that nice production of *Play Memory* by Malcolm Black, a few months after I had just moved up here. It's too long a story to get into, but I had a whole morning of messages on my machine when I got back in at noon, and I didn't know what was going on. It had to do with the Governor General's prize. This woman had tried to get my agent in New York, she was trying to get hold of Bill Glassco, and they were all trying to find out my citizenship. Apparently, all the votes were in for *Play Memory* to win the Governor General's that year, and this woman just said, "I have to verify what your citizenship is." So I said, "It's American, but since I've moved back I've applied [for citizenship]." And she says, "I'm sorry, but that disqualifies you." So I went away a bit with the tail between the legs thinking, "Gee, I don't know how I'm going to do up here with all these attitudes."

I can't really answer the question, except to say that Meech Lake has sucked me into a more intense look at Canadian politics than I've ever had in my life. I always used to say, when I was interviewed in the States, that I always felt myself a Saskatchewan girl more than a Canadian.

Johnson: *Moving back to Toronto is not just a matter of moving back from the States to Canada. It would be a big readjustment even if you were moving from Saskatchewan.*

Glass: Yes. Even a geographical and physical adjustment, in that I lived in a very small old Connecticut town that was settled in 1639. I could go to the post office and the bank and the grocery and the dry cleaners in about forty minutes. In Toronto, you can't park anywhere. And I avoided all the nonsense of New York City as much as I could. The longest I've ever really been comfortable in New York is three or four days. I would be very grateful to get back out to Guildford again.

Johnson: *So it's not a matter of coming from New York to Toronto?*

Glass: Not at all. No, it was a very comfortable little town on the sea, fifteen minutes from Yale, just north of New Haven. So I'm still in the process of making pretty big adjustments....

Just another point on the Canadian question. There is a sort of schizophrenic thing that continues because I'm working for Americans. I came up here and *Yesteryear* was done, but other than that, I've done two American screenplays. It's not as if I came to Toronto and went around with a resume looking for a Canadian job. I relocated my residence, but all of my theatre network remains the same. In fact, the first responses to *Yesteryear* were from American theatres rather than Canadian ones.

Johnson: *Oh really? So that's still your network then?*

Glass: Yes. So what I'm trying to say is that it is harder to become part of a Canadian scene when my salary is in American dollars and my phone calls are pretty much all with Los Angeles and New York. So I'm having to make a bit of an effort, which isn't really that much of an effort. It's quite enjoyable. When I run into theatre people that I seem to be able to talk to, I get them over for dinner and try and find out where they're coming from and what their Canadian context is.

Johnson: *So what is your Canadian context?*

Glass: Well I suppose it's a little nuts, in that my whole childhood in Saskatoon is so terribly indelible with me. And it was for the most part, very painful. Saskatoon has always existed for me almost in its own little planet somewhere. Even all the years I was moving around the United States, Saskatoon always seemed to be an entity off somewhere. It was 2500 miles away. I never thought of it in those terms. And I still don't, even in Toronto. I know that it is at least part of Canada, but it has always seemed to be this separate entity. When one says "formative years", they really are what formed me. And you can't ever really cut yourself off from that.

...

Johnson: *When you think of the audience for your work, do you have an image?*

Glass: Not really. In the beginning, I got terribly put off by Americans refusing things on the basis of their being set in Saskatchewan. So *Artichoke* was a big breakthrough. *Artichoke* got many, many productions in the States, and was a real introduction for many Americans to Saskatchewan. They had never seen anything about Saskatchewan before, or had any idea where it was, or cared about it at all. One hopes that the writing, if it's good enough, will have a universality about it, where it will really travel.

Johnson: *Where does that universality come from? What is it?*

Glass: Well, hopefully you're writing about things that are so essentially human, so much a part of everybody's fabric, that everyone can relate to it.... I don't think you ever really write for an audience.

I have written two novels, a few screenplays, and the plays. Working in the three forms is very interesting. With novel writing you don't have a captive audience, and that is the most frightening thing and the most exciting thing about the theatre: that audience.

The first production I ever had was a play called *Santaqua.* It was done at the Herbert Bergoff Studio in Greenwich Village in New York, directed by a friend of mine, Austin Pendleton. It was my first experience with sitting in an audience and feeling that palpable, really tangible disappointment when we got to a third act that wasn't finished. I hadn't done the work on it. I got to that third act and I didn't know how to tie it all up. And that experience of being in that audience, and just seeing them relinquish the evening - they were bored, they didn't care.

The playwright is like a master puppeteer. You've got them there on the strings, and you just literally have to hold them there for that whole time because the minute it gets a bit lax, boy, you've lost them. I mean a lot of people blame this on short attention spans caused by television and the technological age and all this stuff, but if they start yawning and snoozing and waving the programmes, you've lost them.

Johnson: *They can't get up and take a break.*

Glass: They can't - as with a novel - run out and go to the john, or go get a beer, or something to eat, or make a phone call. You just hope that during a novel people are going to come back to it with some kind of enthusiasm, but a theatre audience is just sitting there.

When you have the experience of going around and seeing the play done in many different cities, you sit in the middle of an audience where certain jokes just cannot be made to work. In Houston. Or in Seattle. Or certain tragic monologues will deeply touch a certain audience on a certain night in a certain locale, and not somewhere else. So it's very hard. It's very ephemeral.

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of how that works for an Eastern Canadian and a Western Canadian audience?*

Glass: There always is, in both countries, an Eastern snobbery that considers itself quite superior and more sophisticated and more metropolitan: more universal.

Johnson: *"More universal"?*

Glass: Well, it's interesting, isn't it? Some of the most parochial people in the world are running Broadway theatres. They have no idea. It's like that famous cartoon, I don't know if you've seen it? It was a New Yorker cover a few years ago. It showed Manhattan and then it kind of said, "New Jersey" and then "L.A." I mean it's such a parochial thing. I mean New Yorkers are terrible that way, but one feels this in Toronto too. That somehow stuff that's done out there is either flawed or unfinished or of a calibre that a shit-kicking farmer might enjoy, but a more educated, informed, Toronto theatre goer wants something a little more "elevated". That's a huge generalization, and yet that does seem to be the case.

Johnson: *Joan MacLeod has a play called* Jewel *that is set in the Peace River district. And when she was interviewed for Fair Play, Rita Much called it "exotic". And then when Ray Conologue reviewed it for* The Globe and Mail, *he thought that Joan MacLeod was describing "a sub-culture". It's perfectly normal for both of them to say*

that, but obviously someone in the Peace River district would never describe the play as exotic. So, the appeal of your plays, on one level, is universal: that someone can identify with the characters and their emotions. But would there be a difference between a New York or a Toronto audience seeing one of your plays, and a Western Canadian audience seeing it?

Glass: Well, this word "exotic" would have been applied to my work by Americans. Not that I think Saskatchewan was really exotic to them in any way. But it was far enough removed that the acceptance of it was quite different. How can I put it? If you live in or around New York, and you're from Kansas or Wyoming, these are not the best places to be from. It's much better to be from some New England state and to have gone to either Yale, Princeton, or Harvard, but Americans are very different about this than Canadians. If you are from Wyoming or Kansas and you make it in New York, everybody applauds. Everyone says, "God damn, isn't that great, came out of that shit-kicking sort of nowhere and writes about something that we are interested in, that we care about."

Because all of my work began down there, I don't have this Canadian context yet. Except that it's very clear to me - being in Toronto - that Saskatchewan, for many Torontonians, is not the best place to come from. In Toronto - and probably this happens in Vancouver too - there seems to be still an embarrassment about certain Western things. You hear all these stories about Western politicians. They sort of show up in Ottawa, and people have to take them out and buy them new ties. Get rid of the plaid shirt. Whereas in the States, when those people with those funny shirts and ties show up in New York City, there isn't any embarrassment. In the United States, it's all just part of this melee of humanity, whereas Canada hasn't come quite far along enough yet to accept Saskatchewan with any real grace.

Johnson: *I was looking at reviews of* Artichoke. *In one, a New York reviewer very fondly called it "eccentric". And then in another, a Calgary reviewer seemed incensed that it wasn't realistic enough. I think he called it "phony". He almost seemed to be saying, "I resent the way you've portrayed these Western characters. They should be more urban."*

Glass: Sometimes these regional things come into it. You just have no idea. My first novel, *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, is set in the Canadian Rockies.... There is a family that summers in the Canadian Rockies and an American woman has an affair with a forestry worker. I was waiting with bated breath after the New York Times review for The Globe and Mail review. It was the most crushing review. The person said that I had chosen to have all of the educated and the sophisticated people Americans, and that I had depicted Canadians through a semi-literate forestry worker in the mountains. That was the furthest thing from my mind. I was really crushed by that. We really rise and fall at the hands of these critics, especially in the American theatre.

Johnson: *It's hard, especially when the critics themselves aren't realizing where their responses are coming from. Because to me, the Calgary response was very regional: it had something to do with being defensive about where you come from and how that's depicted.*

Glass: This last week I've been very carefully reading Ray Conologue in *The Globe and Mail* on the Kenneth Branagh productions [Two productions directed by Kenneth Branagh played in Toronto: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*]. We saw *Midsummer* last week and we're seeing *Lear* tomorrow night. These are not good reviews. There's a whole bunch of stuff there that could only be written by a Canadian

critic: letting us know that he had seen better productions, and letting us know that he knows the texts.

...

Johnson: *When* Play Memory *was done in Saskatoon, did you go?*

Glass: No, I didn't. They invited me. But I haven't been back to Saskatoon since my mother died, which was in the early seventies. This comes back to Saskatoon being sort of an entity out there somewhere for me. It's almost impossible for me to go back at all. And if I went, I think I would want to go without any remaining people in my family knowing I was there. I think I would just want to walk around and see what had changed. The streets of my youth, the buildings are all very indelible to me, and of course, I think a lot of it has changed.

It's interesting how artists very frequently spend their whole lives running away from that pain of childhood. Of course there's absolutely no way to run away from it at all. You carry it with you all the time. Emily Bronte once said that the trouble with vacations was that you take yourself with you. And I feel that is very true of all the traveling that I've done and all the distance that I've come. I'm always drawn back to those formative things....

Johnson: *It must be very difficult to go back. Especially if the Saskatoon of your memory and of your plays no longer exists. Your Saskatoon probably bears little resemblance to today's Saskatoon. Maybe that's one of the reasons why your plays can have so much appeal for people in New York or people in Toronto: they're more than just about that region.*

Glass: Well I think so. The alcohol is a pretty universal thing. *Play Memory* is not getting as many productions as I wish it would get because it's thought to be a downer of an evening. It's a hard thing to slide into a subscription program. You really want to put it in between *Charley's Aunt* and a Neil Simon. In Toronto it's anywhere from $20 to $25 to go to the theatre. Most people want a fun evening. They really don't want to go and come out morbidly depressed. I think there's a lot in *Play Memory* that isn't that depressing. I think there's a lot of humour in it, but that seems to be the overall effect of it. That's because of the alcoholism.

But, listen, if you write about fathers and daughters, these are very universal things. We are, for the most part, universally disappointed in our parents. And we spend much of our lives trying to figure out why they did what they did, and why they took the actions that they did. These are endlessly intriguing questions about who we are, and it really hasn't anything to do with prairies or mountains or terrain at all. It's the social unit of the family and the way in which we hurt each other and share triumphs and tragedies. I think universal writing has to be embedded in these things.

Johnson: *In the* Fair Play *interview, you say, "Theatre has become somewhat anachronistic and elitist and therefore difficult to work in.*[1]*" In what ways?*

Glass: I think theatre is a very elitist pursuit. And I've always felt that there's something very irregular in the fact that small theatres absolutely adore taking on subject matter that has to do with the forgotten, the downtrodden, the underdog in society. The strongest political messages are found in those theatres. And those theatres draw an

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[1]Rudakoff 115.

audience of the converted, because only those people who feel akin to those ideas have the money to go.

I've thought about this a great deal in the States with black theatre. It's grand that they are up there and that they are black and that they are doing their own work, but there's three of them in the theatre and eight hundred white people. Same with native theatre. It's going to be interesting to see what happens at the Royal Alex with Tomson Highway's play. It's a really sturdy-burger, conventional house. What's going to happen there? For me, it becomes very spurious. It's a voyeurism. It's a whole lot of suburban, upper class, white people trying to find out how these Indians feel about their bingo games and so on. There's something wrong with that.

As wrong as a feeling I got in New York for instance, when *Fiddler on the Roof* opened many years ago. I would go to the theatre and there would be something going on between that play and the Jewish audience which really didn't have anything to do with what theatre should be about. Do you see what I'm saying? These very sort of special interest things get in the way for me of what theatre should be about. What an irony it is for me that these little theatres, Factory Lab and Passe Muraille and so on, pick up the hotter political subjects. The people that they're writing about, the homeless and so on, there's not a hope in hell that those people will ever go to the theatre or have ever been.

Johnson: *Is there an audience for your plays that doesn't go to the theatre?*

Glass: I don't know. That's hard to answer. This is not an answer to your question, but it's a personal experience. I have a cleaning lady, who is, I suppose, a lower-middle class Canadian woman, middle aged. And when *Yesteryear* was on I said, "Listen, I've got this play on -" Had it been *Play Memory*, I wouldn't have done it, but *Yesteryear* was a really fun evening. It's an old chestnut, an old comedy. Full of nostalgia. And I thought, "I think she'd have a real good time." So I said, "If you'd like to go, I'll get you a couple of tickets and you call up a friend." Well, panic came over her face.... So I was standing in my kitchen with this lady, thinking, "What am I doing here? I meant it to be: 'Hey, here are two free tickets. Go and have a good time at the show.'" Well she did go. She came back. She was obviously so intimidated by "the writer", I don't know if she had a good time or not. Somewhere in her mind she had formulated an understanding that she did not possess the right language to talk to "the writer". She was so thoroughly intimidated by the whole thing.

And then I go to Passe Muraille or Factory and I see plays about the homeless, and everybody in the audience is bringing in at least $50,000 a year. But as I say, I'm not answering your question. There is a certain intellectual pursuit about the theatre that many people just aren't interested in. They don't want to sit for two hours. That removes it and makes it fairly elitist. And it will never be the price of movies....

One of the smartest things that I've ever heard on this whole question of elitism in the theatre, is that apparently throughout all of Scandinavia, all opera, ballet, symphony and theatre companies invite high school students to their technical rehearsals. Always with the understanding that things are going to fall down, people are going to forget lines, costumes are going to fall off, and there will be twenty minute stops while these things are corrected. All the high school students go several times a year to these things. Well, you know how it is when you're in high school; anything that gets you out of school is great. So there's a great desire to go. And then you get this added insight of a flat being taped together or something being painted or a costume being stitched back on or a pin spot blows on somebody. You see all of that. And there, you are creating your audience. When those people get out of high school, maybe even if they are plumbers or wall paper hangers, that is ingrained. It is something that they will do. Broadway now is really golden wedding anniversaries, bar mitzvahs and for the very

rich. *Phantom* is going up to $65 in New York. Maybe it's *Phantom.* It's enormously expensive.

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Johnson: *In 1976, you said in an interview, "I don't think there's any honest playwright living who'd say he didn't want to be done on Broadway.... You can write plays and have them done in tiny theatres across the country - which I've done. I've never had a really big commercial hit... There's still something important about having the most powerful critics pass judgment on you..."*[1] *What does success mean to you now?*

Glass: It's interesting, because that is changing for me too. It gets into a lot of very personal things. I had great financial burdens raising three kids and getting three kids through American colleges. There was a lot of pressure. When *Artichoke* was done at Long Wharf, and then went out and got all these productions around the country, thank God that happened. If I'd been in Canada, I think the best that I could have expected was possibly five or six productions. I probably had, in the first couple of years after the Long Wharf production, maybe forty or fifty productions. And I got royalties from all of that, which was terrific.

I still feel - and I know I must be very different from a lot of the other Canadian playwrights - but I still think that the big audience for me is in the States. I'm not thinking so much in financial terms anymore, but you want it seen. If you've spent two years all by yourself in a room racking your brain over this thing, you want more than a couple of productions. Especially with something like *Bodies of Thought* [Glass' new play-in-progress]. If it's done here, I would like it to be played in a three to four hundred seat theatre. It might have eight shows a week and it might run a month. Well, it's spitting in the ocean. Some part of my mind, already as I'm writing, is saying that there are a few people from New York that I would want to get up here to see it. To see if they would have any interest in getting it out to the regional theatres in the States.

I suppose I shouldn't really make these judgments. There's just an awful lot of really interesting stuff going on here. Last weekend, I saw the opening of *Lion in the Streets* [by Judith Thompson], and I just sit there so torn. For me, there is an awful lot of stuff [in the play] that is self-indulgent and doesn't work and needs a dramaturge. And of course she insisted on directing it, so there was no objectivity there at all. But there are wonderful brilliant passages of writing. There are wonderful scenes. They are as good as you will see anywhere in the world in theatre. The calibre of that writing! Then the other part of me takes over and I think: "I want Americans to know about this. And I want England to know about this." There's something that goes on in Canada that is the antithesis of that. It's a kind of: "Fuck 'em. We're going to do our own thing up here. We're going to find out who we are. Establish our identity." So if I went to Judith Thompson and said, "Hey, I have some contacts in the States where I think maybe this work could be done," she'd be offended.

Then I started trying to analyze how Canadian that work was. Would it move? References to rivers around Toronto, to suburbs, to certain towns that mean to the Canadian psyche a certain thing, that would mean nothing down there. Much of the play would get lost. So I come away from an evening like that very confused, but exhilarated. There's wonderful work being done there and yet she has nailed it down. Well, I'm not quite sure what I'm trying to say here.... I think of theatres that I know throughout the States, I try to imagine sitting there, and I just don't know how people would relate to it and whether it really is universal enough. The things that are on her mind and that preoccupy her are, God knows, wonderfully universal, but there still is something

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[1] Esther Tennenhous, "U.S. Playwright Finds Roots in Canada," Winnipeg Free Press 9 December 1976: 33.

about nailing it down to one small geographical area that represses it in some way. It would be very interesting. I just can't imagine seeing that play [in the States]. I would love to have the opportunity of seeing it down there.

...

Johnson: *Just before I shut the tape recorder off, is there anything else that you want to mention?*

Glass: No. I'm just going to try and calm down a bit about this adjustment to Toronto because I was getting very hyper about it. Feeling that I was just so peripheral here. Doing all this American screenwriting and hearing from American theatres just after *Yesteryear* was put on here, I just felt that I was here in body only.

I like this old house a lot. It's a hundred and one years old this year. Houses have always been very important to me because I hardly ever go out. Writers are pretty much hermits, so houses are important, and I really like the house and I like the neighborhood. We're very close to downtown.

I just have to learn more and make more adjustments and not get quite so defensive. There are things that are startling to me, and they are only startling to me. They mean nothing really to Canadians all around me. The most startling fact for me, having lived six years in this tumultuous racial time in Detroit, is that there are more black people in the United States than there are people in Canada. There are 28 million black people, all of whom carry with them, of course, the history of slavery and illiteracy. It's a very big subject. When I hear Canadians talk about aboriginal problems and likening it to American problems, I mean, I want to laugh. I did laugh the first few months I was here, and that offended Canadians because obviously they don't know about all that. They only know about the natives and whatever their concerns are.

I have a lot to learn. There are things that annoy the hell out of me. The term "multicultural" annoys me. Even more so: "visible minority". These seem to me like racist terms, but in fact, it's exactly the opposite. Canadians are sort of trying to say, "We are not a melting pot, we are a mosaic. People all have their own identities." When you come out of thirty years in the States, you're suspect of that. You think: Hmm, does that sort of mean that all those people in Rosedale are saying to the Ukrainians, the Portugese and the Italians, "You go and decorate your funny eggs. Go wear your funny babushkas and just don't mess with me on Bay Street." To some extent that's true. So there's a great deal to learn.

Johnson: *It's a long process of adjustment.*

Glass: It is. It takes a long time. I still have a sister-in-law in Washington, D.C. who, God bless her, she has, for two years now, clipped every single theatre and movie and art article out of *The New York Times* and sent it to me in great big envelopes. There's one sitting over there that I haven't opened. And it's diminishing, but I used to really look for those packages. I miss *The New York Times*. I didn't feel, in reading *The Globe and Mail*, that I was falling into anything. It was just such a foreign newspaper. Of course you feel that whenever you change cities. But I'm losing that now. I'm realizing that there really is a very viable life and society going on up here, and that it's reported in *The Globe and Mail* and *The Star*, and that I should spend some time and rather determinedly learn about all this.

Then, every six months or so, a really black period hits me and I think, "I'm going back, I don't understand any of it here. The kids are down there. I'm going back." And with the screenwriting that I'm doing - I'm paid very well - I would be taxed at 28% in the States, and I'm taxed at 46% here. It's really mind boggling. And everybody says to me, "But oh, we Canadians, we have OHIP and you don't have medicare in the

States." But I would have to spend a lot to make up for this 46% income tax. I mean economically, Toronto is just outrageous. It's more expensive than New York City. And it's a shock to go to the grocery store. It's almost half again as much. Certainly the meats are. Unfortunately, your feeling - when you first come back after being away as long as that - is that you're being ripped off a lot.... So all of these things take adjustment. This feeling of being kind of ripped off.

Johnson: *Are you in danger of losing your contacts in the States?*

Glass: Oh, I think you always are. I'm already finding that I don't correspond as much as I would like to with friends in Connecticut, although I make quite an effort to keep up with it. But, you know, new things are happening here too. So hopefully it will all balance out.

PAMELA BOYD trained as an actress at the Drama Studio in London and has performed in England, Scotland and Canada. Originally from Calgary, Boyd has worked with several Western Canadian groups, including Northern Light Theatre and the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts. After moving to Toronto with her husband, designer Terry Gunvordahl, Boyd had her first child and wrote her first play. *Inside Out* was workshopped at the Blyth Festival in 1984 and produced at Tarragon's Extra Space in 1986. Her second play, *The Bare Wood*, was commissioned by Alberta Theatre Projects, and developed at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts. Since 1987, Boyd has written two radio dramas and has had another child. She was offered a residency by ATP for the 1990-91 season in Calgary. Her new script, *Odd Fish*, was produced at the ATP Playrites Festival in 1992.

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Interview with **PAMELA BOYD**, Wednesday, JUNE 13, 1990

I met Pamela Boyd on a weekday morning at the Lick 'n Chicken, a vegetarian café that had retained the name of its former fried chicken tenant. Most people had already gone to work, but the traffic down Bloor was heavy. We sat on the terrace and tried to hold a conversation above the din of cars, buses, trucks and other conversations. Boyd had just accepted a position as writer-in-residence at Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary, and was hesitantly contemplating life in the West.

Lise Ann Johnson: *Are you still working as an actor?*

Pamela Boyd: From time to time. Part of my contract with ATP is that I'm going to get to do some acting. I like acting, but I hate the business of being an actor. It's not a very good thing to be when you have young children anyway.

Johnson: *That must be difficult.*

Boyd: I've been up since 5:30 so I'm a little bit out of it.

Johnson: *No wonder you wanted a double cappucino.*

Boyd: It's funny that you should be interviewing me now, based on *Inside Out*, because the baby that that was modeled on is now 10 years old, but I just happened to have another one who is now exactly that age. Exactly. It's like a *déja vu*. So that's why I've been up since 5:30....

Johnson: *Is it harder with two?*

Boyd: In some ways.

Johnson: *Are you going to write a sequel?*

Boyd: No. Well. Terry [Guverdahl, stage designer and Boyd's husband] thinks I should. He thinks I should do the up side. But I've done it. That's it. I'm more interested in other things right now, but it would be interesting to do the up side. One of the problems with the piece is that it's an awkward length and nobody does it. It's too long for lunch time and it's not big enough for an evening, so it needs a companion piece. Mine or somebody else's.

...

Johnson: *What are you writing now?*

Boyd: I'm into my grown-up phase. [She laughs] Well right now I'm interested in the relationship between cultural identity and the arts. That's what this next piece is mostly all about. It happens to be conveniently timely. I think that whole Meech Lake issue is about that. But also this whole business of Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe. It's very timely.... It's set in the most Canadian of places. I'll leave you with that. I don't want to go into long details of it.

Johnson: *It's set in the most Canadian of places?*

Boyd: Yeah. It's set in cottage country, in a marina up north. It's about a Czech artist who came post '68 to Canada. She has a husband and family and everything here, but she never overcame the culture shock and never went back to her work as an artist. She was a sculptor. So it's about why she hasn't.

Johnson: *That's interesting. It reminds me a bit of* Inside Out.

Boyd: No matter what I'm writing about my theme tends to always be a woman's struggle to find her creative voice in a man's world. This is my struggle and it's what I write about, whether I know it or not. And in a way, my radio work was the same, although it wasn't quite pointedly the creative voice. A woman's place and how women fulfil themselves in a man's world....

Johnson: *Do you think in terms of your audience when you write? Who are you writing for?*

Boyd: No, I guess I don't think in terms of my audience.

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of who comes to your plays?*

Boyd: Women like my plays.

Johnson: *More so than men?*

Boyd: I think so. Well, it's difficult to generalize because there's only this and my radio work so far. My other play, *The Bare Wood*, never got an audience. I think it was part of a process of me becoming a writer. In fact, I don't have a product at the end of it. It was hurtful but necessary.

Johnson: *What was* The Bare Wood *all about? That was a commission by ATP?*

Boyd: Well, I did three drafts and then we all agreed that it needed a rest. So we rested from it for a year, and then I went to Banff two years ago and wrote a fourth draft, after which it was very clear that that was enough and it went into the bottom drawer.

Johnson: *What was it about?*

Boyd: It was a very personal piece. It was a very personal piece. Deeply psychological and infinitely complex. Far beyond what I had the craft to deal with, and I think also beyond the emotional maturity to come to grips with. It was a very, very complicated piece about violence. It was a closet clearing piece basically.

Johnson: *So it will sit in a drawer for a while?*

Boyd: Yeah. I mean, Margaret Hollingsworth read it at one point, at third draft, and she said that she thought there was a one-act in it. I hope that maybe someday I'll go back and make it into a one-act, because there are things in it that I really liked and images that are continuing to be relevant as far as I'm concerned. But I think it was a process of me learning to become a writer, and also me working my own shit out.

I think - this is a broad generalization - but I do think women have a tendency, if they're honest, to write much more personal plays and go through a much more personal process. They're often more connected to their emotional lives. You know? And I

think some women perhaps avoid it but come to it eventually. I know, that for me, writing is a way of me understanding myself in the world and my relationships. And sometimes it happens to get splurted all over Banff Centre. [we both laugh] And sometimes it's just in my diary. I tend to only write a journal when I've got something very specific to work out in my mind and my heart. When I'm happy and contented I don't write a journal.

Johnson: *That's interesting.*

Boyd: Frustrating.

Johnson: *So that's what pushes you as a writer? That need to understand yourself and what happens around you and how you relate to it?*

Boyd: Yeah, I think so. And what started this piece off - the Czech piece - my husband and I were in Czechoslovakia four years ago; the first time I'd been behind the iron curtain. That whole sort of romantic excitement of suddenly being in a KGB novel took over. I spent a lot of years reading KGB novels and being really stuck on them. At one point, I even wrote a couple of proposals to Radio Drama to write the process of becoming a defector. I'm fascinated by what makes people compromise their own culture to another. I find that quite fascinating.... When somebody decides to leave a country like Czechoslovakia, post-revolution of course, often it's forever. So it's a big decision to make. If they make that decision, what do they think they're going to gain? And what do they think they're going to leave behind? And when they arrive, does it stack up? Do they discover that they'd gained what they thought they were going to gain? Do they discover that they left a lot of stuff that was really valuable behind? Those kinds of questions really, really fascinate me. So that's what started me off on this piece.

Johnson: *Have you answered the questions for yourself? Or is it more of an exploration of what they're all about?*

Boyd: Well, I think it's an ongoing process. I think what happens is that you discover more questions, rather than answering the first ones. You discover more questions, and I guess you narrow it down and narrow it down. And what it's done for me is really make me examine the cultural life of this country and ask questions about it's relevancy. Whether we are slowly developing a cultural identity. Whether there's something really here to identify with. I've become quite cynical about it actually.

Johnson: *Really?*

Boyd: Yeah. Quite cynical.

Johnson: *In terms of the theatre?*

Boyd: The whole shmear. The whole shmear. So those are the kinds of questions that I'm still wrestling with at the moment.

Johnson: *Has it changed how you look at the Canadian theatre scene?*

Boyd: A bit. In general ways. Maybe it's living in a place like Toronto, but I feel that we're very fragmented. There are too many cultures. That's part of what I love about this place; that there are so many cultures. But it's also divisive. It feels like we're a refugee camp.

Johnson: *Instead of a Canadian culture?*

Boyd: Yeah. None of the cultures of the different ethnic groups are really a live culture. I mean I suppose that WASP culture is the closest to a real culture that we have. But the other cultures, like the Hungarian community here, have a Hungarian that is no longer spoken in Hungary because it's frozen. I think that happens in a way with cultures too. Something gets frozen, and it's not living and breathing and changing.

Johnson: *Not like what the Québecois culture has done?*

Boyd: No. No. That's a whole different thing. I don't know. It's a huge question. It's just huge. I found myself over the Meech Lake thing saying to myself, "Now, do I feel emotionally involved in this?" And my answer was: "No, I don't." I don't feel torn in any way. I don't feel threatened in any way. I don't feel like I have a lot at stake. So I decided, Meech Lake wise, that I don't have a real investment in this, but I'm interested in the outcome. I feel like I'm sort of standing outside watching it. But I think that is the function of artists: to watch and reflect. It's not to really be in there and change. Marcel Masse and all his "why aren't the artists taking a stand" and all that. I think that's off base somehow. I don't think our function is to change things. Our function is to reflect it. And reveal it.

I also think it's because - and I'm not unique in this, I'm representative of a large number of the population - I'm not Canadian. I'm mid-Atlantic. I was born in Britain and I still have a foot there. A huge amount of the population of this country is still hearkening back to the old country in some way. One foot, one toe in the old country. So long as that exists, then there isn't the whole soul here....

Johnson: *I'm not sure we have a Canadian identity. Do you?*

Boyd: Well I think we are very regional too.

Johnson: *So what's different about Toronto?*

Boyd: It's just that it's multi-cultural, I think. The ethnic mix is wonderful. I love it. I just love that aspect of living here, but, at the same time, I don't think it helps. In a way, the American melting pot makes a lot of sense. There is an American identity because of it, that we don't have here. There's an American culture. We may not particularly like it, but it is something cohesive that binds that whole population together. I don't think we have that here.

Johnson: *So in a city like Calgary, where there's a different ethnic mix -*

Boyd: Oh, Calgary's so bloody white.

Johnson: *So what happens then? Do they have an identity that's more -?*

Boyd: No, I don't think Calgary has that at all. I grew up in Edmonton. So I have a very Edmonton view of Calgary, right? [She laughs]

Johnson: *Okay, so let's take Edmonton then. Is it different?*

Boyd: I don't know. It's just - I just think it's underdeveloped. I don't know!

Johnson: *Do you think the audiences are different in Edmonton than they are here?*

Boyd: No. I don't actually. I don't. Well, it may be less sophisticated. It may be, but I doubt it. And don't ever tell them that I said that. It's the same. It's that same segment of the Toronto population that goes to the theatre here. You know?

Johnson: *So you're getting the same theatre crowd everywhere?*

Boyd: Yeah. I think so. I think so.

Johnson: *It's hard to tell. I talked to one person who suggested that there are certain plays that you couldn't take to Vancouver from Toronto and vice versa.*

Boyd: Well, don't you think that it's probable that Vancouver has more in common with California than it does with Toronto? Culturally? It does have that same old hippies and mystical stuff.

Johnson: *Okay. So what do Edmonton or Calgary have in common with Toronto? I'm not sure that it has a lot in common with Toronto. Or maybe people would like to think that it doesn't and it really does?*

Boyd: I feel like I've become such a Torontonian really. I mean I grew up in Edmonton but every major turning point in my life has happened in either Calgary or Banff. In a lot of ways, I'm really not looking forward to living there again. I think it's mostly the size and the way you have to live in those cities. Those cities were built around the automobile. That's one thing that drives me nuts. And because they are very white. I think that the size of the cultural communities means that there isn't a wide of range of slots to fit into. There are four or five pockets that you can fit into, and if you don't fit into one of those, you just don't fit anywhere. Here you can almost make your own pocket. You can just fit wherever. Your output can be as little or as much as you want. You can mix as many aspects of life as is convenient for you. I just don't feel that's possible in the West....

Johnson: *Although there is a lot of theatre in Edmonton, a lot of the theatres do very similar work. So there aren't a lot of pockets to fit into either as a theatre person or an audience member. Whereas here you can find feminist theatre or performance art.*

Boyd: Most of my real friends are not theatre people at all. I have two or three that I guess you could call theatre people, but the rest are painters and dancers and those kinds of things. Mostly "Moms" is what they are. But that's another thing about a place like Calgary. You move into almost any neighborhood in Toronto and know that within a two block radius there's going to be half a dozen people that you have a lot in common with. In Calgary, that just ain't so. We were back there four years ago for a year. We moved into a neighborhood, and there were no kids. I mean, there were no kids. Everybody's grandmother lived there and they were all retired and they all spent the winter in Florida. Or wherever. Hawaii. Mexico. Where do they go?

Johnson: *I think it's Arizona.*

Boyd: Arizona, right. And I find that really depressing. I really rely on having a neighborhood. But that's population too, I guess.

Johnson: *So where do you fit here, in terms of the Toronto theatre community?*

Boyd: Where do I fit? Marginal. Pretty marginal. Well, because I haven't produced anything theatre wise since *Inside Out*.

Johnson: *Have you been writing for the theatre? You're working on this Czechoslovakian project.*

Boyd: I've been writing for radio.

Johnson: *Which I guess is transportable.*

Boyd: Yeah. But you see, I had another baby.

Johnson: *That's a big challenge.*

Boyd: It's a big challenge. It's really, really difficult to find time to do other things.

Johnson: *If you decided that you wanted to fit into a theatre community: "Here's my play, I want it produced." Would you choose Toronto?*

Boyd: Yeah. I think so. Well. Yeah. It depends.... I've worked with Jackie Maxwell [Artistic Director of Factory Theatre] on *Inside Out* and I'm working with Jackie again on this Czech piece. She and I work well together. It seems to be a good partnership. I like Factory Theatre. It's not as if I hang around and have lots of buddies there, but I guess it's that kind of place that I'd get into. I've never worked with Nightwood.... I don't know them very well. I also sort of ride a bit on the coat tails of my husband who designs in the big theatres in town. So I know the people at the big theatres, which is not necessarily an advantage.

Johnson: *It depends on what you're writing.*

Boyd: Yeah. When I applied for a [Canada Council] B Grant, Guy Sprung, who I've known for a long time, wrote me a recommendation. He was really interested in this piece, but of course now he's fired [from Canadian Stage]. But I don't know. He would never produce this. It's much too feminist. He's scared of feminist work, but he's very enamoured of Russia and Eastern Europe. It's just up his alley. But at the same time, I think ultimately it will be too feminist for him.

Johnson: *You said that your plays are partly about women trying to write in a man's world. What have you discovered along the way? Have you figured anything out during the process of writing?*

Boyd: Well, I think that the opposition is out there. The world is not making it easy for us. But I think that the answer is inside. I think the answer is in knowing yourself. Getting your own shit together first. When I wrote *Inside Out*, it sort of came out of me. It just sort of ran out of me. I think first works do for a lot of people. They sort of write themselves. And then the second piece was mostly just dealing with me. The only obstacle in my way was me organizing my time and having the discipline to do it. It's only really since I've had the second child that I suppose I have made a real solid commitment to myself as a writer, and that I've really found out how difficult it is. I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* many, many years ago and thought all the things that you're supposed to think, but it's only now that it's a reality. I'm trying to do both things, and I'm really impressed by how difficult it is. I think probably one of the biggest frustrations in life is that those who haven't tried to do it simply have no idea how difficult it is to have a creative life and run a family. It is tremendously difficult and it's only recently that I've been able to pat myself on the back and say, "They don't understand but their judgment doesn't count." Just because you haven't produced three

major works since *Inside Out*. Their judgment doesn't count. I know how hard it is. And other people who have done it know how hard it is. But it is. It's tremendously difficult.

Johnson: *Joanna Glass talks about not actually writing until her kids reached a certain age. I find it interesting that the push to write partly came from the experience of raising a child. Is that accurate?*

Boyd: Oh, well, I was living in that situation, but the push to write was from the fact that I wasn't getting work as an actress. We moved to Toronto when I was already six months pregnant, so I never had a chance to get a career rolling before the baby came. So my whole career as an actor really fell to pieces. A lot of the reason I wrote it was that I wanted to write my own work....

Johnson: *Did it act as a catalyst? The creative drive was always there, but did it take that to get you writing? Is there an irony here in that on the one hand it's very difficult to be a writer and raise a family and balance the two, but on the other hand, was it partly that - ?*

Boyd: Well it started my writing career. For sure. I mean, I wrote up to that point. But letters, a journal. I had never really considered myself a writer until that.

Johnson: *Is that a big step? Saying "I am a writer"?*

Boyd: Oh. Yes. I suppose so. I don't think it's a step that happens on a particular day at a particular time.

Johnson: *How does your background as an actor work into your writing?*

Boyd: It's absolutely fundamental to it. Totally fundamental to it.... I really know, right down here, [she points to her stomach] when a play climaxes, how long you can hold a stream of dialogue, rhythms. It's all in there. Play structure. I've read so many plays and been in so many plays, it's part of the grist. And of course, when I'm writing, I hear it all. I know whether it's possible to say it. Whether it sounds right coming out of your mouth. I write for the spoken word very much. Not for the read word....

Johnson: *Is there any other form you want to move into?*

Boyd: Well, I've tried to adapt some of my radio work into short stories. And I was completely astonished at how difficult it was. Intensely difficult. I don't know. I like writing poetry but I haven't the foggiest idea whether I'm any good or not. There's a lot of poetry in my radio work, though....

Johnson: *What will you do at ATP?*

Boyd: I want to do a whole lot of things at ATP. I'd like to be involved in a new play workshop of other people's work. I have very little confidence in my ability to read other people's works. It scares the daylights out of me.

Johnson: *Because you're a writer yourself?*

Boyd: No. I just have very little intellectual academic self-confidence, so I would like to develop some of those skills and develop some confidence in that. I would like to do

a little bit of directing in those kinds of situations. I want to do some acting. I want to be paid for what I'm doing for nothing.

Oh, I know what I was going to say about the domestic thing and the writing. This piece, so far, at least in the first draft, has a very, very conventional structure. It's a family drama set in a kitchen. It's what my husband calls kitchen table drama. It just came out of me that way no matter how firmly I made up my mind that that wasn't going to be it. It has come out of me that way and I'm very bored with that. I'm very frustrated with it and I really want to depart from it, but part of the reason it's happened, is that it's so much a part of me, of my life. When I write, I'm ten steps from the kitchen table. You get two hours on Wednesday and four hours on Thursday between picking up the kids and doing grocery shopping and balancing all those things at once. So I think that's one of the things that's locking me into this structure which I really, really, desperately want to depart from. And this piece really needs a departure from it because it's so connected with contemporary art, which in Czechoslovakia is very abstract. I really want to get those elements into it. So I'm going to a Benedictine Abbey in Saskatchewan for two weeks in August. It's the Saskatchewan Writer's Guild retreat.

Johnson: *That's great. Just to get away from the day to day?*

Boyd: Well, yeah. It's very difficult to sustain the creative process when you've got two hours on Wednesday and two hours on Friday. There's all these other things going on as well and you're juggling it all in your head. That's one of the most difficult things for me. It's just hard to have the energy; to never be able to sustain the thoughts, and to be able to put it down and let your mind wander, and let it sift. That's what's really hard about trying to do both. It is all very well to have a room with a lock, but if every time you come out of it you've got to do dishes and change diapers and go grocery shopping -

Johnson: *But I wonder if there are patterns in that that part of an audience is going to recognize?*

Boyd: Well, yes. This character has two children, but they're older than my children. And yes, that's very much a part of her and a part of her frustrations, but I feel that there's a way of having that and this other very abstract thing. Just getting inside the mind of a creative person. It's not an orderly place. It's not a structured place.

Johnson: *So, this play is partly about you as a writer and partly about this other person?*

Boyd: Yeah. Well, you know. It's my concerns again.

Johnson: *So what do you want an audience member to walk out of either* Inside Out *or* Jana's Landing[1] *with?*

Boyd: One of the biggest thrills is to have people coming out and saying, "Yes, those are my concerns. That's really how I feel. That's one of the things that I'm struggling with and boy it's nice to be validated." That's what *Inside Out* did for people. It validated people. It validated a whole section of the population that had never been validated in the theatre before. Mothers of young children are validated in comics, and sometimes in the movies and in books, but not in the theatre. And that was a real thrill. I mean

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[1] *Jana's Landing*, Boyd's new play, was subsequently called *Odd Fish*.

people came to me with tears in their eyes: "How did you know about my life?" It's wonderful. It's just great....

Johnson: *Do you want to see* Jana's Landing *produced in Czechoslovakia?*

Boyd: Oh. I can't tell you how much I want to do that. I really want to have it translated and produced over there. Czechs here have told me that there's a great gap in understanding between those who stayed at home and those who became immigrants. People at home have false ideas of what life is like living away from home, in Canada. So I want to address that too. Help bridge that gap.

That was the great thing about *Inside Out.* You've got these people that must feel so alone. They think no one else is going through the same thing that they're going through. It was also really neat to have husbands and wives sitting together. And the wives saying, "Did you see that?" In fact, I got two letters from men. So that was neat.

Johnson: *Who do you hope will see your new play? You want people from Czechoslovakia to see this. Do you also want just the general population?*

Boyd: Sure.

Johnson: *When I was reading* Inside Out, *I sometimes thought that it's specifically going to appeal to women with young children. And I just pictured all these mothers having to stay home because they couldn't find a baby-sitter.*

Boyd: There was that. There was that.

Johnson: *How do you get around that?*

Boyd: Well, you hope that it takes off. In fact, it ran two weeks and we were absolutely packed the second week. We could have run much longer. It's too bad. One of the groups of people that saw it and liked it was my mother's generation. Women of my mother's generation. I didn't think that they would be sympathetic, but they were. They were. A couple of them said, "Men couldn't do this. It takes a really strong person to do this. They don't have the resources to understand."

Johnson: *It is so important for audience members to have someone say: "Yes, this is important work."*

Boyd: And that's the trouble with it: most theatres are still run by men. Men read that and they don't twig to it. I don't think it reads as well as it plays. It plays really, really well....

Johnson: *Robert Crew's review of* Inside Out *in the Toronto Star called the play "a worthwhile examination of a subject that has not always received that attention it deserves."*[1] *Do you think that, in general, plays that talk about domestic experiences get the short shrift? And why?*

Boyd: I think it's because domestic experiences are mostly a woman's world - traditionally, exclusively a woman's domain - and men run theatres. Men aren't interested in

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[1]Robert Crew, "Drama of Bringing up Baby a Worthwhile Examination," Toronto Star 3 March 1986: D1.

that. Yeah. I think that's it. Maybe a couple of years ago I wouldn't have said that, but I think that is so.

Johnson: *If you could change things in the Canadian theatre, what has to be changed?*

Boyd: God. That's a big question.

Johnson: *It's too huge?*

Boyd: Yeah. It's too huge. I don't think I can answer that. I mean humanity has to change. People have to change.

Johnson: *Do we need more theatres for women's work? Or do ones that are directed to a general audience need to be more receptive?*

Boyd: Of course we need more women's theatres, but that has to go hand in hand with the audience being aware that it's necessary I think we can complain all we like about the theatres not putting on plays by women, but until the audience is really aware of that lack and complains about it, I don't think there's going to be a real drive to change it. It's the chicken and the egg, isn't it?

Johnson: *But the more successful something like* Inside Out *gets, then the more people realize. In a way, that's how people complain, is by giving support to it.*

Boyd: Yeah. I guess so. Or not taking season tickets to theatres that don't do women's work. I don't know. All that has to change. The whole cultural scene here is off-kilter. I mean, when you think about a country like Czechoslovakia, the whole population is so much more plugged in. It may be male-dominated and patriarchal and all that, but at least they really go. There I was being shown the art world in Prague by an ambulance driver. I mean that just doesn't happen here.

Johnson: *So do you think we're elitist when it comes to art?*

Boyd: Yeah, I guess we are, aren't we?...

Johnson: *What's the difference between the way people respond to art there and the way they respond here?*

Boyd: It's part of life there, in a way that it isn't here. Here it's like something overlaid on top. It's like a perk. An extra. That's the way government sees it too. If we're having trouble with the budget, cut the arts. It's superfluous. It's not superfluous there, and people don't regard it as superfluous. You can't have a country run by a playwright if it's superfluous. It's important. It's something that reflects who they are....

Johnson: *If Canadian society treats art as not essential, it's not just the government, it's also our lifestyles. So what has to change? Do the writers have to change too?*

Boyd: I don't know. I really don't know.

Johnson: *Maybe it comes back to this whole Meech Lake thing.*

Boyd: I guess. I guess. I don't know. I'm feeling really disillusioned about Canadian culture. I'm really wishing that there was some way that I could live in Europe. My

husband's a designer and I said to him at one point, "What's stopping you from showing your portfolio in Czechoslovakia?" And he said, "Because my portfolio reflects Canadian taste, and it's tedious and boring. I don't have the opportunity to go the artistic distance that I would like to go as an artist in Canada." It's that distance that would make him competitive in Prague, and you know, I think that applies to all of the arts. We are really plebeian here.

Johnson: *Regional?*

Boyd: I guess. And I think if this piece were really to connect with an audience here, it would be rather tedious over there. I don't know for sure, but I would suspect that. For the visual arts, that is certainly true. My husband trained for a while with Josef Svboda [Czech designer], who's from Prague. He works for the National Theatre in Prague. Stage design is so head and shoulders beyond what we do here. And lighting design. Just head and shoulders.... The distance to which they can artistically extend themselves and will be accepted by an audience: they're far ahead.

Johnson: *Do you think we're too introspective here? That we're so obsessed with ourselves that it can't be relevant to anyone else?*

Boyd: No. I just think that we don't care. We're just interested in buying clothes and watching junk American television. I don't think we give a shit. That's the problem. Don't you?

Johnson: *Yeah. We have so many things at our disposal that it's very easy for art to not mean anything.*

Boyd: The very fact that we judge our artists by whether or not they're accepted abroad is a bad sign. We don't know enough about ourselves or our own culture to say whether we think it's good or not, or relevant or not.

MAUREEN HUNTER grew up in Indian Head, Saskatchewan. In 1970 she received a B.A. in English from the University of Saskatchewan and moved to Winnipeg where she worked as a journalist and report writer. Hunter began writing plays after taking a creative writing course at the University of Winnipeg. She has been writing on a full-time basis since 1983. Her first play, *Poor Uncle Ernie in his Covered Cage*, was produced by Agassiz Theatre in 1986. Her second full-length play, *Footprints on the Moon*, received a nomination for the 1988 Governor General's Award for Drama, was also premiered by Agassiz and had subsequent productions by Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon, Centaur Theatre in Montreal and Equity Showcase in Toronto. *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* was produced by Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1990 and co-produced a year later in Ottawa and Edmonton by The National Arts Centre and Phoenix Theatre. Her latest play, *Transit of Venus*, is slotted for the 1992/93 season at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. Hunter currently lives in Winnipeg with her husband.

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Interview with **MAUREEN HUNTER**, Friday, June 29, 1990

I talked to Maureen Hunter at her home in Winnipeg where she lives with her husband. The outdoor patio at the back of her house overlooks the river, and our conversation was marked by various adventures with grasshoppers, hornets, blue jays, cats, waterfowl and several planes passing overhead. On tape, Hunter was candid about both her experiences as a prairie woman playwright, and her insecurity with her script-in-progress. However, some of her most concrete suggestions for change came after the interview, once the recorder had been turned off: an annual "best of the west" festival to exchange views and plays; theatre awards in Manitoba; more networking among playwrights in other Western provinces. She talked about the need to detach both stigmas and definitions from Prairie writing. We shouldn't expect grain elevators, but we shouldn't abolish them either.

Lise Ann Johnson: *How did you start to write for the theatre?*

Maureen Hunter: I wanted to write since I could read. I spent five years as a journalist and I've worked for corporations as a writer. So I've really spent most of my life writing, but I've only actually been writing what I wanted to write for the last seven years. I was 35 when I started. Initially, I started out writing short stories. I was planning to write short stories and novels. I hadn't thought about writing theatre, and that was only because to me, the playwright was something different. I didn't know who wrote plays, but I thought it probably wasn't somebody like me.

I took a creative writing class and one of the assignments was to write a one-act play, and it just worked. Something happened for me.... Whereas I had found it really hard to get my short stories published, right away with plays, things started to happen. I think that was partly because we have a good playwright's organization here and they do workshops. And then through the University of Winnipeg, at that time at least, if you were part of a playwriting class you had the chance of having a public reading. And then my first full-length play [*Poor Uncle Ernie in his Covered Cage*] was produced. It was picked up by Agassiz, which doesn't exist anymore, but it was a theatre that was originally set up to do Manitoba plays using Manitoba artists. Gradually the mandate changed and then it just died. At that time, that was what they were doing. So I had a production of my first play. It was like being shot out of a canon.

Johnson: *So it all happened quite quickly in terms of writing for the theatre?*

Hunter: Well it did, you know. Sometimes when I look at the last seven years I think I haven't accomplished very much, especially when I look at my bank balance, but actually I think I was probably in the right place at the right time. It's funny to talk about moving. Svetlana Zylin was here in June for a PACT conference and gave me a long lecture about how lucky I was to be in Winnipeg. She said that it's not that I couldn't probably function in another city now that I have some kind of history, but when I began, for example, if I'd been in Toronto, it would have been really difficult to get started. And probably I wouldn't have. It would have taken a lot longer. As it is now, there aren't that many playwrights in Manitoba, and so I'm in a really good position locally.

Johnson: *When I started this project, I phoned Rory Runnells at MAP [Manitoba Association of Playwrights] and got suggestions of who to interview. I had read* Footprints on the Moon, *so I knew that there was at least one woman playwright in Manitoba, but when I asked who else I could interview, in terms of women who had had professionally produced plays in Manitoba, he couldn't help me. There just weren't. Why, I wonder?*

Hunter: ....I don't know why. I think it's something that a lot of writers don't think about until they're presented with an opportunity. Most of the writers I know are writing fiction. I have a friend who's a screen writer and actually there's quite a bit happening now in Manitoba in that area. I don't really know. It's not that MAP hasn't tried to really focus on women because they have. But, you know, I think it's a really tough business. I think it takes a really strong stomach and thick skin.

Johnson: *It's not just difficult for women. It's the whole new play development scene?*

Hunter: I don't know. I don't know what it is. It may partly be role models. When I came, Wendy Lill was doing real well and so it said that women can do this. And getting back to what I said earlier, I never thought that a person like me could write a play. In my mind, it's been kind of a masculine profession, because the major playwrights that I was familiar with were men.

Johnson: *That's true. Also, I think that you deal with so many different people in this profession. There are so many elements that come into producing a play, and the majority of people that you end up dealing with are men.*

Hunter: Are men. That's right.

Johnson: *From artistic directors to whatever.*

Hunter: I think that's made it harder for women's work to come forward because men tend to choose what they're interested in, of course. Then you run across some male artistic directors who are extremely open to women's work. It's hard for me to draw conclusions about it. Although I've been rejected hundreds of times, you tend to forget the rejections when you have a production. So my sort of over all feeling about the Canadian theatre community is that it's quite receptive to women writers.

There was a theatre in Toronto that was interested in doing *Footprints*. It was a male artistic director, and finally it came down to he would do it if I would rewrite Act Two completely and take the husband out. It could have just been a misunderstanding of what the play was all about after a cursory reading, but I was worried at that point because there weren't any other productions on the horizon, and I thought, "Boy, if I'm going to run into that kind of feeling repeatedly, it's going to be real tough."

Johnson: *A lot of your plays have a Western setting. Does that make a difference when someone in Toronto looks at the script?*

Hunter: I'm sure it does. They won't admit it you know. I think there are two things about breaking into Toronto: one is that they're busy developing playwrights in Toronto and if they're going to do new work, it'll be their's. But there also is in Toronto just a whole different psychology. Some plays that do extremely well in Toronto just don't do well here at all. We have a different mentality here and I think it's a little more rooted in the emotion and less cerebral. That's my sort of reading of it. I don't know. There's an actress in Toronto who's applied to do an Equity showcase production of *Footprints* in

Toronto in April, and if she gets approval it will be interesting to see how that goes over there because to me, it's a very non-urban play.

Johnson: *....How did* Footprints *go over in Montreal?*

Hunter: It went really well. It wasn't well received critically. Well, I shouldn't say that, I think the Gazette review was kind to the play and not so kind to the production. Subsequent reviews were just not real good, but it was a long enough run that there was word of mouth and in the end it did quite well. Surprisingly, at least I was surprised, it did better there than it did in Saskatoon.

Johnson: *Oh, really?*

Hunter: Well, it's hard to know what happened in Saskatoon. Again, I got just a vicious review in the Star-Phoenix.... We also hit one of those weeks of forty below.

Johnson: *And nobody wanted to leave their house?*

Hunter: I just don't know. It was done on their second stage and it was only a ten day run. I was disappointed in how it did there. But there's something about *Footprints*: although it sort of came out of Saskatchewan because that's where I was raised, I never would expect it to do all that well in Saskatchewan because I think it just hits a little too close to home there.

Johnson: *....Who is drawn to your work?*

Hunter: I noticed that you had that question in there. You see, it's hard for me to say because I think each of my plays has been so different. That's a deliberate thing. I'm really trying different things all the time. I think the kind of audience that would like *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* isn't necessarily going to like *Footprints* and vice versa, so it's really hard for me to generalize.

Beautiful Lake Winnipeg did extremely well here. We made sure that people knew there was a language warning and a content warning and so on because we were trying to avoid too many walk-outs. I think there were about four, and they were mostly elderly people. And so I kind of assumed from that, that it was a young person's play. But at MTC they told me that a lot of the subscription audience at the Warehouse [MTC's second stage] is quite old, and they were fine. I don't know. I guess what I'm trying to do is write plays that will be produced here and elsewhere, but at the same time not try to do anything that is absolutely standard and expected. I kind of want to surprise people with each play.

Johnson: *Your plays are quite different in style. I can see some similarities between* Poor Uncle Ernie *and* Footprints, *but even the style of the them is quite different.*

Hunter: And with *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* I was trying to stay plot-oriented, whereas with *Footprints* everything flows into character. And in *The Queen of Queen Street*, I tried some things that were almost surreal.

Johnson: *That was an interesting combination of styles.*

Hunter: I really got slammed for that. I don't know, it kind of scared me. You have to remember that chronologically, *The Queen of Queen Street* came after *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* in a real sense.

Johnson: *Oh really?*

Hunter: Yeah. I had written three or four drafts of *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* before I wrote *Queen Street.* And then I went back and did a few more drafts of *Lake Winnipeg*, but I think of *Queen Street* as my last play. And I was experimenting with things that - I don't know, I'd really like to see it done again just to satisfy myself that some of the things I tried were worth trying.

Johnson: *I think it's a very interesting script.*

Hunter: I wish I could get it done again.

Johnson: *Maybe the whole setting business comes into it again. You assume that it's for a theatre in Winnipeg, but in a way it's too close to home.*

Hunter: That's one of the things we were trying to do when I wrote it: I was hoping it would travel. I mean every city has characters like that.... I think people kind of dismissed it as a play about madness, and that wasn't what it was supposed to be.

...

Johnson: *What is it that you hope people will walk away from your plays with?*

Hunter: Again, it depends on the play. *Footprints* is a play that really seems to reach women. I don't want to call it a woman's play, but I think that it says something to women about women's roles and their attitudes towards relationships, their bent towards the men in their lives. Women can come out of the theatre really angry at Joan, or they can come out feeling that she represents them in some way because the play really deals with loss. It deals with the effect of loss in our lives and how hard it is to turn it into something positive rather than letting it load us. And every woman I think - well, every human being, but particularly women - seems to be able to relate to that.

With *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, what I've found is that people could watch it on two levels. One was strictly as entertainment. It's a thriller, it's a mystery: who did what to whom and why, but if you really thought about what the characters were doing and why they were doing it and what it says about society, it's a much more serious play.

Johnson: *People can take it at either level?*

Hunter: Yeah. I guess, in a way, that makes it more likely to be successful, doesn't it? Because the thinking audience member is going to find something to come away with, and the person who just goes to be entertained is entertained.... It was a lot of fun to write. It was a real relief from *Queen Street*, which was so heavy and so depressing. When you have to spend a year or so in somebody's shoes, you would like it to be somebody's who's had a happy life. I found that was a real downer. *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, in spite of the problems that I had with it along the way, was basically fun to write.

Arthur Miller says that if he could watch one of his plays and be acutely embarrassed, then he knew that he had something. And that's the way I feel about *Footprints.* There's something about *Footprints* that embarrasses me whenever I read it. I don't know what it is. Whereas *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, in spite of the subject matter and so on, I can watch it and really enjoy it. There's a distance there I guess.

Johnson: *That's interesting. I wonder what it is?*

Hunter: Well, maybe she says something about myself that I'm not very happy with. I don't know.

Johnson: *In the Montreal Gazette review of* Footprints *the reviewer talks about this juxtaposition between the urban and the rural: the rural was associated with things staying the same and the urban with things changing. To me, the play says that nothing remains the same. You can try and write about Rose Coulee as something where nothing changes, but it does.*

Hunter: That's right. In fact the CBC reviewer said that Joanie's essay is almost like an eulogy and that's exactly right because that town, in spite of all the love and care that's gone into it, is dying. She's clinging to a sinking ship, but she loves it and that's where she's going to stay. But also, I never set out to write a play that compared rural and urban. It was necessary for Boone to be the kind of person who would leave and Joan to be the kind of person who would stay. And if you leave, you probably end up in a city, you probably don't end up in a small town. So it was really never meant to be that, although there is that element to it.

Johnson: *I think the reviewer picked up on that because she was from an urban centre. She called it a Prairie drama.*

Hunter: It's part of my thinking. I grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan with five brothers, and from the time that I was quite young, there was an understanding that if I stayed, I would probably be a farmer's wife or something. And so I always kind of knew that I would leave. I think that if you grow up in a rural area, you have that. My father's family, some stayed in Saskatchewan and some went to B.C. and got rich. They would come back every four or five years and they were always so well-dressed and everything. So the world did break down for me into people who stayed and people who left, but it was more of a character thing. I didn't at that time think of it in economic terms, but of course it is economics. I guess if you could make a living and live the way you want to in the country we'd probably all do it.

Johnson: *That becomes increasingly more difficult.*

Hunter: That's right. I've still got two brothers at home. One just recently lost his farm and the other one has the home farm. It's just sad.

Johnson: *....I love the idea in* Footprints *and* Poor Uncle Ernie *of all these people who really want to escape, but never really can. You can go as far away as you want to, but you can't lose that connection. The people who want everything to stay the same can't do that either, and that's what links them.*

Hunter: One of the writers I like is Isaak Dinesen and all her stories to me deal with longing. It's a fundamental human condition. We all long for something, and the day that you stop longing is the day you die. I think if there's one link between all of my plays, it's probably that sense of longing.

Johnson: *There's a real focus on the characters in your play and what longing makes them do. Whether that makes them cruel to each other or -*

Hunter: That's right, there's no doubt about it. With all the plotting in the world, it still comes back to the characters and letting them become real enough so that they take the story over. That's my process. I always fight it because I think I've got this great story

in mind, but once I've worked with the characters long enough that they become real, that's the moment of magic because from that point on, they basically write the play....

I'm working on a new play now, which I'm having a terrible time with. I wanted to get right out of Western Canada. Right out of Canada. I heard this story about an astronomer who lived in France in the 1760's. He was involved in charting the passage of Venus. Venus crosses the sun twice in a century, and in the 18th century they sent astronomers all over the world to chart this passage because if they could get accurate measurements, they could determine the distance between the earth and the sun. Anyway, I ran across this story and I'd been wanting to write a love story. So what I've done is taken what I know about his life and woven a love story into it. Here's a case where it was the situation that intrigued me, and I've worked the characters into it. But again, I know that the characters will take over. In fact I'm even wondering right now if it isn't going to become the woman's story rather than the astronomer's.

Johnson: *She's in the process of taking over?*

Hunter: I think so. I'm just having an awful time of it. Something's funny about it. Again, it deals with women's attitudes towards relationships compared to men's. I think it's sort of a fundamental female condition, in spite of women's lib, that we put relationships first, and men put work first. So it deals with that, and I think if I'm going to tell that kind of a story, I should probably be writing it from her point of view. I know it better.

Johnson: *Do you end up writing what you know about or what you can relate to?*

Hunter: Yeah. I can also really understand the astronomer: this need to make a name for himself and make some contribution to science. You only have to look at the sky at night to be intrigued, right? So I can see his side of it, but what he does to the people that he supposedly loves, I really feel from their side rather than his.

Johnson: *Was your decision to write about something that wasn't Canadian a conscious one? Was it an attempt to try something new?*

Hunter: Yeah. Both I guess. Obviously I can't write about Toronto. I've never lived in Toronto. And I don't want to be branded as a Prairie playwright in that sense. I was sort of tossing around for an idea, but what I'm taking on is crazy because it's another century and another country. It's not going to be easy....

Johnson: *Oftentimes, stories cross time boundaries. People can relate to it whether it's set in the 18th century or modern day rural Saskatchewan.*

Hunter: Well I hope so. We'll see. I'm working with Steven Schipper at MTC on it. He wants to direct it sight unseen, and I think that also put a lot of pressure on me. It's the first time I've actually had somebody say, "You write it, I'll produce it." Well, that's not true because *Queen Street* was commissioned.

Maybe I'm at a sort of watershed point with my writing. I've been writing for seven years now and I've been drawing on emotional reserves that were there for thirty five or forty years. Now I've reached a point where I have to dig deeper and you know, maybe at this point in my writing, it either gets much better, or I find that I don't have it for the long term. You know what I mean? I have a fear that that's what's happening. I don't know. I think it's a process, in talking to other artists, that you do at some point reach. And maybe that's why a lot of writers keep switching genres. They've sort of touched the apparent bottom in one particular genre, so they switch and start fresh in another genre. I don't know. But I really love theatre and I want to stay with it.

There's interest now in film. I've had enquiries about film rights and I've been saying, "I don't want to get into that," but financially it makes a lot of sense.

Johnson: *What's not attractive about film for you?*

Hunter: If you just say, "Okay it's yours, but get another screen writer," you don't make any money. So you almost have to do it yourself. It's just a whole new genre and I would rather stay with theatre. So the question will be whether I resist the temptation to make some decent money for a change and let somebody else do screen plays.

Johnson: *I imagine there are a lot more limitations on the material and how much artistic control you have.*

Hunter: Oh, it's terrible. I've talked to script writers. They don't believe how much input you can have as a playwright. Boy, talk about being at the bottom of the pile. It's awful.

Johnson: *....In terms of playwriting, what's the ideal process for you of developing a script? Or what have been some of the best experiences you've had?*

Hunter: Working with other people?

Johnson: *Yeah.*

Hunter: The best thing for me is to have a theatre that is interested in working with me on it. And then I usually try to come up with a first draft fairly quickly, which isn't happening this time. Then it goes to the theatre and I have a couple of other people critique my work: George Torwels at the U of M, Svetlana Zylin, maybe a couple of friends who write, and my husband. I get all their comments and I let them sit for a little while and then I do another draft. And then they've been workshopped. The last two or three were workshopped by Playwright's Workshop Montreal, and that's been very useful. I find workshops can be really good or really awful, depending on who's involved.

Johnson: *What makes a workshop good? I've heard some people suggest that they have to be play-centred or playwright-centred.*

Hunter: The actors should have no ego, the director should have no ego, and the playwright should have no ego. The only real concern is the script, and that's very hard to achieve. It takes actors, directors and a dramaturge that are really skilled at workshopping. I came away from the last one in Montreal, which was for *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, with an idea that one particular scene didn't work at all and I came home and totally rewrote it. I was having a terrible time with it and finally the director here read it and said, "Throw it all out and go back to what you had." Somehow or other, I came away with an idea that the scene wasn't working for a whole bunch of reasons that weren't right. So I think you really need to do the workshop, have a discussion about it afterwards, go away, wait a month, and then talk to the principal people again to make sure that your thinking is still right. So it's almost as though the workshop can't end when it really ends. You need those people.

Johnson: *You need a follow-up to it or you can get side-tracked?*

Hunter: Oh, it can be awful. It really can. Because you remember the comments in the workshop and start thinking that the problem is much greater than it is.

Johnson: *Is the workshop process still really necessary? Just to have the play read out loud?*

Hunter: I like to hear it read. I don't know what to say because I really have never done it any other way. I'm assuming that it is necessary. I'm sure it irons out a lot of problems that would crop up in rehearsal if you didn't do it. I think you need to have it read by actors who are committed enough to the characters to really have done some thinking about them. That's almost more important to me I think: to hear how the actors respond to the characters, and if they have questions, where the questions are.

Johnson: *Is it important to have a community of actors, artists and writers to draw on?*

Hunter: Yeah, it is.

Johnson: *Is there that community in Winnipeg?*

Hunter: You see, I basically have my own. As I mentioned earlier, I'm a bit of an isolationist. I really am. I find that the theatre community is competitive and brutal and I've sort of drawn away from it. The writers that I have as friends are not in playwriting. We are on the phone back and forth all the time . We critique each other's work. We all like different kinds of novels, but it seems to me that you can read a novel that's of a different type and you can still be generous about it. There's something about theatre that's more competitive. People aren't as generous in their response and their comments within the theatre community.

Johnson: *People are always coming at it from their own interests, so a director would approach it from a director's point of view and not a writer's point of view. You end up with so many different points of view.*

Hunter: If the play's solid, that's wonderful because everything just explodes at that point. It really is amazing what good minds can do when they come together, but if a play isn't solid, that's when it all shatters. People realize that they're not dealing with the same product. Each has a different view of it.

Johnson: *When you have a collaborative process, you have to find a way to still be true to the playwright's vision, unless it's a collective process.*

Hunter: I find the whole collaborative aspect of the theatre very hard. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that my plays have been influenced by different people at different points, and whether that's good or bad I don't know. Maybe it's good. Once in a while I'll toss around the way things might have gone with a play or how it might have been written, and I'll realize that it went a certain way because at a certain crucial point somebody said something that made me veer off.

Johnson: *And sometimes that's good and sometimes it's not?*

Hunter: That's right. You definitely need people reading your work and giving you feedback.

Johnson: *I think it would be very hard to write in complete isolation.*

Hunter: I don't think you can, especially for theatre.

Johnson: *You said that you tend to be isolationist. Still, would you like to have more contact with writers in other Canadian cities?*

Hunter: I think that might be better in a way. Contact with other playwrights outside of Winnipeg is probably better than contact with other playwrights inside Winnipeg because we're all competing for the same piece of cake. I'm really looking forward to meeting people in September [PUC's 1990 general meeting was held in Winnipeg]. Even though I belong to PUC, I've never gone to any of the annual meetings. I'm scared to death I'm going to be elected to some board. I don't want to do that. When I started writing, my income went from a good income down to zero, and one of the things that my husband said was, "You're going to write. You're not going to run organizations and sit on committees and this kind of stuff." And I think that's fair enough because a lot of energy is dissipated by running organizations. So that's one of the reasons I've stayed away from getting involved in that level.

Johnson: *That makes a lot of sense. Do you think you've had a quite different experience than writers in other cities?*

Hunter: In terms of how plays are developed? I'm probably the last person to ask because I haven't even really talked to playwrights in other cities about how they go about it. I just think that I've been in the right place at the right time and the support has been there when I needed it. When Agassiz folded, MTC came along to do *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*. It just all has fallen into place for me really well. Touch wood. Because it could have been very different. And in the period where Agassiz folded and before *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* was to be done at the Warehouse, I was pretty nervous. That basically left Prairie Theatre Exchange, and I don't think I write the kind of plays that they like for their audiences.

Johnson: *What do they tend to produce? I'm not familiar with their work.*

Hunter: Every time they try something kind of bold and experimental, the audience is up in arms. It's not my kind of theatre. Ideally, I love the kind of stuff that the Warehouse does, and over time I'd want more and more to be done by theatres that are doing harder-edged, more controversial theatre. That's the sort of direction that I want to go in.

I think one of the things that concerns me about working with MTC on my new play is that there's some talk about mainstage. As soon as they say mainstage, I just freeze because I don't like anything that they've done on mainstage. Although I'd like to have the money from a mainstage production, I don't really want a mainstage production. I'm going to be seeing Stephen next week and that's one of the things that I want to talk to him about. I want to think of this play as a Warehouse play because otherwise it inhibits me so much. I know the stuff that people who go to MTC want to see.

Johnson: *It's not just putting it in a different space, but also a different context.*

Hunter: Absolutely.

Johnson: *It can break a play.*

Hunter: That's right. I think Canadian playwrights by and large, with a few exceptions, aren't used to writing for the big stage. We haven't been trained to write for the big stage because the only way that we can get produced is by keeping the characters and everything else small.

...

Johnson: *How do you feel about Blizzard? Has that been important?*

Hunter: It's been phenomenally important. It's great. When I think about it, it all started so innocently. I got a phone call one day from Gord, one of the guys - this was before *Footprints* was being produced - and he said, "We're thinking of forming a publishing house to publish Western Canadian plays, and if we do, would you let us do *Footprints*?" And I thought, "Oh sure, you know -"

Johnson: *It'll never happen?*

Hunter: So I said, "Well if you get it going, great, I'll consider it." And they came back and said, "We've done it, so can we have it now?" It's just been a tremendous boost. Of course the Governor General's nomination was the biggest thing. I think that really helped because it made it possible for artistic directors to say, "This is a Governor General's award nominee," and they could sell me to their boards, whereas before, I was totally unknown. It gives you a bit more of a national profile, so it was wonderful. Also, when you're sending out scripts, it's just so much nicer and more impressive and you get so much better attention when you send out a published play, rather than an 8 x 10 manuscript.

...

Johnson: *When I read reviews of* Beautiful Lake Winnipeg, *a lot of the reviewers seemed to applaud that you'd moved from being centred in language to being centred in action, and that somehow that was a positive thing. I don't think it's a negative thing, but for me one of the most appealing things about your plays is the ability to sit down and explore a character, and you do that for me through language and imagery. Do you have any response to that?*

Hunter: You know critics: I don't think they can give you a compliment without taking it away. People have worked really hard to get the poetry out of my plays because when I began writing *Poor Uncle Ernie*, which was my first play, everything was through language. I guess I've been formally and informally criticized locally for being too language oriented. So I think what they were doing when *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* was produced is saying, "See, she finally agreed with us and she's going to write plays that are less language based." I really don't know.

To me, when somebody steps on stage, I don't want to hear high-falutin language, but I want to hear language that's just a little bit better or a little bit more interesting than maybe you and I would speak. Because what is it? It's words. To me, the rush comes from what you learn through the words, the emotions that come out through the words. For example with *Footprints*, I felt comfortable with the language that the characters were using because I know small towns. I think that in small towns on the Prairies you hear the most poetic language. And it comes naturally, nobody's trying to be pretentious. There's something about the art of storytelling on the Prairies. It's well developed and they know how to use words. So maybe it's kind of an urban reaction. I don't know, but I've certainly heard it often enough....

I've talked about this with different people. Svetlana said, "Why would you fight the poetry?" She said so many writers try to get it in and can't, and if it flows naturally, then why fight it? So that might be kind of a local thing, I don't know.

Johnson: *I'm amazed that reviewers, when they're reviewing a new script, feel like they have to put their two cents in on the script rather than the production. Half the*

time they don't even have the story right. You can't expect, after having seen it once and never having read it, to formulate some sort of intelligent dramaturgical analysis. It amazes me. And it's all because it's a new play.

Hunter: That's right. Critics are the worst thing about writing for the stage. Somebody said that criticism is opinion disguised as authority. That's all it is and it's one person's opinion. And it can really make a difference. Especially the Free Press review. I don't usually agree with the guy at the Free Press. If he writes a review of a play and says it's great, I don't go because I know I won't like it. And that's the main voice here. So I get really frustrated. I've stopped reading negative reviews. So unless somebody says, "It's really good, read it," I don't read them. And the only reason to read the positive ones is that it does help when you're sending out scripts if you can include some good reviews. I hate doing it because it's almost like giving power to the critics every time I do it, but you're always asked for it.

Johnson: *....Do different theatres in Winnipeg have different audiences?*

Hunter: I think so. I think that the Warehouse, although they do have an older component, is more like the Phoenix in Edmonton. It does the more adventurous stuff. And I feel that PTE began as a theatre that was quite adventurous and because of its audience, has grown quite conservative. The Fringe has become the place where really new hot-off-the-press stuff is being done. It's really great to have that here.

Johnson: *It's helped a lot in Edmonton to introduce new writers.*

Hunter: Well, I think the Fringe has brought a whole new audience to theatre. I don't know how many of them, after going to the Fringe, flow back to MTC or the Warehouse or PTE, but if you go to the Fringe you see people that you would never see at MTC.

Johnson: *Even if they don't go back, that's still a new audience.*

Hunter: That's right. And I think theatre is something you acquire a taste for. It takes a little while, but if you can get people into theatre of any kind and give them an experience that is distinct from watching film - everybody knows how to go and watch a film, but I think you kind of have to learn how to watch a play.

Johnson: *Even the event of going to the theatre is very different. Talking to people in Vancouver was interesting because apparently they have problems getting people into the theatre. I think it's partly that it has to be built into people's lifestyles.*

Hunter: I've read various things about Vancouver. I think the city tends to attract people who like an outdoor lifestyle. They like mountains and they like the ocean and they really don't want to sit in the theatre at night if the weather's good. Whereas we have a cold climate, and in the wintertime you go crazy if you don't go out and do something during the winter months. You've got to.

Johnson: *It's like that in Edmonton.*

Hunter: Another good reason for writing on the Prairies, I think, is that the climate is conducive. Once it gets cold, what are you going to do? You might as well write. On a day like this, in the summer, I won't do anything. What are you going to do when it's 20 below? I think I'm really lucky to be able to do that.

Johnson: *Do you think that your writing has what you would call a feminine voice or a female voice or a feminist voice? And what does that mean?*

Hunter: Well, I've gone through stages of being an ardent feminist, and I've kind of swung part way back again I guess. So I think that the feminist voice is there, but basically what I try to do is care about my characters, male or female, and come to understand them. I don't know. With *Footprints*, some of the violent reaction that I got towards Joanie came from feminists who really weren't comfortable with a woman like that. They thought that she was a woman who can't live without men and can't let go and get on with her life. In other words, she's not a feminist. And I guess she wasn't, but I didn't really present her as an example of who we should be. In fact quite the opposite: she's an example of somebody who hadn't learned to grow and let go and place proper value on things.

In *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg*, the women are really the worst in the play. They're awful. Both of them. And there's nothing that the men would do that the women wouldn't do first. So from that point of view, even in evil, women can excel. Like with my new play, I really do think I'm going to be switching the perspective from the astronomer to the woman. So it's bound to be there because I am a woman and I see things from a woman's point of view, but I do really like men and I hope that shows in my work because I've tried to create men that I care about. For example, when I was writing Boone, I had a really hard time finding the kind of guy that he should be. And finally, somebody said to me, that when Tennessee Williams was writing plays, he had to be in love with one character in his play in order to write it. And George said, "I think you have to be in love with Boone." So I created a character that I found really intriguing. So really, he's the one I love in the play, not Joanie. I had a lot of fun working with Mitch in *Beautiful Lake Winnipeg* because he's everything that women don't like in men, and yet there's something about him that's very attractive.

...

Johnson: *Your new play is written from the male perspective?*

Hunter: We've seen so many stories told from the male point of view. And if a man had written *Footprints*, he'd probably have written it from a male point of view. Because this new play is an adventure story, I really wanted to approach it from the masculine side. I know for sure that if a man were writing it he would be more interested in this man's journeys and his journals and all that stuff, but I was intrigued by what happens when a guy goes away for five years: "Goodbye, I'm off to do my job." What does he expect to happen in his home while he's gone? I sure hope I can pull it off.

Johnson: *Maybe people shouldn't expect a single female point of view?*

Hunter: That's right. And that's what audiences and critics have to learn. There are many female points of view. Many feminist perspectives. The only play that I've sent to Nightwood is *Queen Street* and they've still got it. I haven't heard from them. I did meet Kate Lushington a few weeks ago. I guess I wouldn't normally seek out feminist theatres for my plays, so maybe that says something about the kind of audience that I want.

Johnson: *You said that you like to do something quite different every time you write, but that there are certain links among your plays?*

Hunter: Each one sort of grows out of the previous one.

Johnson: *How do you see the new one fitting in, in terms of what's different about it and what links it to the others? Or do you know yet?*

Hunter: It is kind of early. Obviously the fact that it's in another country and another century and another culture will be a departure for me. It may end up being a kind of period piece, although I still don't know how I'm going to handle all that. But I guess the link will be an exploration of relationships between men and women. I'm interested in all relationships , but through my plays, it tends to be between a man and a woman. That's sort of the thread that runs through them: the effect that we have on one another's lives.

Johnson: *It will have the element of a love story?*

Hunter: That's what I started to write, but I think it's taken a dark twist somewhere in my head.

I don't know how writers maintain their confidence. It's just the hardest thing to do. The reason I like to get a first draft done quickly is because if you think too much about it, all the instinctive stuff kind of gets buried and then you start wondering if you can do it and you think you've lost all your skills. It's a terrible world.

CONNIE GAULT was born in Central Butte, Saskatchewan in 1949. She received her B.A. in English from the University of Regina. Her first play, *Sky*, was workshopped in the Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre 1986 Spring Festival of New Plays and by Playwrights Workshop Montreal. It was produced by 25th Street Theatre in 1989 and toured to Theatre Network in Edmonton that same year. Her second play, *The Soft Eclipse*, was also workshopped by the Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre. It was first produced by The Globe Theatre in Regina in 1989 and most recently produced by 25th Street Theatre in 1991. Both plays have been published by Blizzard. Gault currently lives in Regina with her husband and two sons. She also writes fiction.

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I interviewed Connie Gault on a Monday morning in her house in Regina. Outside, the almost-July heat was unbearable. Gault was feeling ill, but her house was dark and cool and filled with comfortable furniture. One or another of her sons would occasionally tromp up the stairs while we talked. She debated the merits of play development, expressed her suspicion of theatre's "collaborative" nature, and jokingly threatened to turn all her future plays into short stories.

Lise Ann Johnson: *How did you begin to write and how did you move into writing for the theatre from fiction?*

Connie Gault: I started writing stories about 12 years ago when I was taking university classes after my kids were born. I met some people who were writing and that intrigued me. I started writing too. I had written quite a bit when I was a teenager and then had just given up on it. At the same time, I was taking an introductory drama class. One of the things I really wanted to do was to write plays. I got a few "How to Write Plays" books out of the library, and they all seemed to be very discouraging and said you couldn't possibly write a play if you didn't have a theatre background, and that you should go out and volunteer for Little Theatre and so on. I just couldn't imagine myself doing that as I was already trying to get an education and raise two little boys, so I decided that playwriting was really a foolish thing for me to think about doing, and that I'd better concentrate on the fiction. So I did.

Johnson: *How did you start writing for the theatre?*

Gault: I wrote a short story called "This Now Fenceless World", which is in my collection[1]. I really liked the story and wanted to continue it, but I wasn't very interested in taking the characters further in their lives. What interested me was exploring that one incident. I thought that I could do that quite well in a play, and since the characters seemed very alive, I thought, "Well, why not try it? Why should I care if the books say I can't do it? I'll just do it." At that point I had already learned that you could do a lot of things that you were told you couldn't. Even though I had no background in theatre whatsoever, I wrote the play, and that was *Sky*.

Johnson: *Did you have any connections to the theatre community when you started writing it?*

Gault: No, except I had a few friends in the Playwright's Centre here who have written plays and had them workshopped. So I knew that if I wrote a half decent play, I could have someone work on it. I'd at least be able to see some actors read it and stage it a bit, so that I could see whether it was worth my trying to continue with it.

Johnson: *Was that important in terms of developing the script?*

Gault: Yeah. You write a play for yourself, but you can't really rewrite it until you see other people's contribution to it. That really helps in the revisions.

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[1]Connie Gault, Some of Eve's Daughters (Moose Jaw: Coteau Books, 1987).

Johnson: *So what exactly did happen? You wrote a draft and it got workshopped at the Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre?*

Gault: That's right.

Johnson: *And so you rewrote another draft and then it went to Playwright's Workshop in Montreal?*

Gault: The [Saskatchewan] Playwright's Centre workshop must have been in late May. So that summer and early fall, I worked on it a bit. I didn't really know what to do with it, even though I'd seen this workshop. I'd thought this workshop was so wonderful, and I really thought it was a pretty good play. So I sent it out to about three different theatres and to Playwright's Workshop Montreal. Two of those three theatres didn't reply for over a year. One, Tarragon, replied right away with some interest in the characters, but not much in the play. I didn't hear from Playwright's Workshop Montreal for a little while, and then one day Michael Springate, who is the Artistic Director there, phoned me about the play and wanted to know what I wanted to do about it. Well by that time, since nobody out of these three places that I'd tried had lept up and down and said "let's do it", I decided that it probably needed more work. So I talked to him over the period of almost a year. We talked back and forth and I sent him a couple of drafts and we discussed them. And then I went there with a draft, or a kind of an in-between draft, that they did a week-long workshop on.

Johnson: *And did that result in the final script?*

Gault: Well then I came home and I changed it some more and worked on it some more. I worked it nearly to death.

Johnson: *It's a long saga?*

Gault: Yeah, it is. But I was learning all the time about how to write a play and I was learning a whole lot about the theatre at every step of the way. So probably with both of these two plays, they're really learning plays for me.

Johnson: *Could you have written* Sky *without places that were willing to workshop your plays and give you a chance to work with actors to see what works?*

Gault: That's a tricky question. Yes, I think I could have, to tell you the truth.

Johnson: *What would have been different?*

Gault: A lot of people helped me a whole lot. In some cases what they did was speed up a process that I would have taken longer to get at, and in some cases they allowed me to see how bad some of the lines sounded and some of the things looked. And how good others did, so that I could make some judgments. I'm divided on how I feel about the workshop process, if you want to know the truth really. I feel that it's helpful for a beginning writer and it's necessary for any writer to see actors and hear actors. I'm not so sure about dramaturgy and I'm not so sure about getting directors so involved early on in a play. I once was. I really thought this was the only way to write a play when I first started, especially for someone who doesn't know anything about theatre, but now I'm not so sure that it is.

Johnson: *Can it be confusing sometimes?*

Gault: Yeah. Sure, it can be.

Johnson: *So for you, what would be the ideal process of developing a script? Would you do it in isolation?*

Gault: I think that the best process that I know of right now is the one that the Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre has, to tell you the truth. And that's because they're pretty flexible and obviously playwright centred.

Johnson: *As opposed to being centred on the director?*

Gault: Or on a theatre, which is very different from being centred on a play. A theatre always has to keep it's own mandate in mind, whereas a Playwright's Centre is going to keep the play in mind: this particular play at this particular time.

As somebody who's already written two plays and seen them produced, I'd write a first draft on my own, from beginning to end. I would very likely be in my second draft before I show it to anyone. Then I'd get some actors together for a playwright-directed workshop, so I can see it at its most uninterpreted and hear it at its most uninterpreted. And then I'd go back and probably do another revision. Or if I was happy with that, then I'd want to bring in people like a dramaturge and a director to start seeing how another person's vision would feed into the play, and how that would change it or enhance it.

Johnson: *Do you think that bringing in more interpretations at an earlier stage can become confusing?*

Gault: It can be confusing for the writer. Well, confusion is sort of a normal state for a writer. That doesn't bother me so much because you go home and you sort through the confusion and you make your decisions. They're not always right ones, but you have to make your decisions anyway. So I'm not really worried about protecting the writer from confusion so much as I am concerned with maintaining an individual vision. Because it's really, really hard for two people to share an identical vision. I don't think it's necessary in producing a play, but I think the best plays have a single vision. The best dramas have a single vision. Once they get on the stage, then others feed into them and make it bigger. But right when it's being written I think it has to just be one vision, unless it's some kind of collective project. That's a totally different thing.

Johnson: *How would you compare your experience in Saskatchewan to what you know of other writers' experiences in other cities?*

Gault: I don't have a very comprehensive sense about what other people are doing, except that there aren't very many playwright's centres. There's Playwright's Workshop Montreal. There's the New Play Centre, but that's totally different in my opinion. I don't believe that's run by playwrights at all, so I feel it's not really the same kind of thing. So really there's only the two in the nation. I imagine that everywhere else is extremely different. I think the developmental work is done in the theatre. That probably means that, at best, the right playwright gets into the right theatre and it could make a really good mix. The playwright who is interested in certain social issues goes to a certain theatre and that works great.

Johnson: *But writers do run into problems if they can't find the right theatre?*

Gault: They have no place to go. The other problem with this system is that theatres develop protegé writers whose work they're obviously interested in. They've put some investment - time and money - into these writers, so obviously they're going to be looking at their scripts. It becomes quite a little in-house thing. Now that doesn't bother me, but I prefer the independence that you have with the playwright's centres, which is a different kind of body altogether.

Johnson: *It can be difficult for new writers to break into theatre otherwise.*

Gault: Well, sure.

Johnson: *...If people can't find the right theatre, they can end up writing within a mandate, and lose that single vision.*

Gault: That's right. That's right. Almost every theatre that has a developmental project, at least any one that I remember getting information on, gives you a little four-line blurb on what their mandate is. Usually most of their mandates sound really goofy to me. They're trying to put what they want into some very short statement. Often I just think, "Well, I have no interest in writing for this particular theatre."

So what do you do with a play? Well, that doesn't concern me actually. I just write. If I want to write a play I'll write one, and if nobody wants to do it then I guess I'll just have to live with that.

...

Johnson: *How would you compare the experience of writing fiction and writing theatre?*

Gault: There are some similarities, especially between short stories and plays. They're both very focused. Unity is extremely important in both those forms. So if you're a short story writer, I think a play comes more naturally to you than maybe if you're a poet or a novelist. I don't know if that's true, it just seems like they have that sameness to the form.

Johnson: *That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that.*

Gault: It's somewhat more free and fun to write a play.

Johnson: *In what way?*

Gault: Well, you really let your characters live. They just talk to one another, and you don't have to interfere with what they do. It's very freeing to your imagination to write a play. That's what I found. Not just your characters but also images and so on. You split your mind between two people when two people are talking, it's like you're playing a little psychological test with yourself and making all these associations back and forth. Yeah. So I find it fun to write, but I also find it frustrating because you can't use all the narrative techniques that work in fiction that add all the depth and the atmosphere and characterization....

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of who your audience is for your plays? Or does that depend on what theatre they're done in?*

Gault: I suspect that for either of these two plays the audience would be the same, no matter what the theatre would be. So in some theatres they wouldn't have much of an

audience and in some they'd have more. I think they would probably appeal to people who are not easily bored, and who don't mind looking under things. It's more exploratory work than action. So there's a certain kind of person that that appeals to.

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of the response to your plays? Either from women or men?*

Gault: I really had a lot of positive response to both plays from women in particular. *The Soft Eclipse* appeals in particular to women. I also had a lot of support from men who really liked the plays, especially the men who have worked on them and been really involved in them. Comments after both plays would have been equally divided among men and women. It has more to do with the expectations that people go to theatres with. If they're expecting traditional plot structure and traditional kinds of laughs and a climax, they're maybe not going to accept it.

Johnson: *Often when you read a play and you find out where a play is set, if it has a rural setting in a Prairie town, you almost expect a certain style. But I find your settings surreal, almost in the same way that Conni Massing has made her setting grotesque in* Gravel Run. *The style is definitely not what you expect from the setting. Did you play on that expectation?*

Gault: Yes. Um. It's a bit maddening to write a play set in a small town in the Prairies. It makes you mad that you did it, if you want to know the truth, because you know that people are going to say, "Oh another Prairie play. The same play. Another elevator drama." So first of all, the theatre people are going to have a prejudice against it. All the people who review it and look at it are going to have the same kind of prejudices against it. Just automatically. And they're all going to take it naturalistically, if they can at all. One of the things with *Sky* was that I wasn't able to get it enough out of the naturalistic realm. I don't think it's a naturalistic play, but a lot of people approach it that way.

Johnson: *Just because of the setting?*

Gault: In a way it is because of the setting. I almost should have had it occur on the moon or something like that because it's so frustrating. Yeah, because the setting is very clear. It's frustrating for me, but I did it and it's written and that's the way the story is. But people's preconceptions of course are always in your way as a writer. It's not their fault, it's just that you have to work around them.

Johnson: *I don't think either of them are naturalistic plays. I find the settings have some extra surreal quality to them.*

Gault: Certainly it was in my mind that they would have. So that when you think of a Prairie setting for *Sky*, what I'm really getting at is the emptiness of the world, and the contrast between the claustrophobia of the little house and the emptiness around it. And then for *The Soft Eclipse*, it's only set in a small town because I was interested in examining women's lives that were really shut off from the world. I put them in a small town to emphasize it, but really all women into the mid-60's in Canada, at least in Saskatchewan, were shut off from the rest of the world. Except for the very, very few exceptions who were really well educated.

Johnson: *I looked at reviews of your plays and sometimes I got the feeling that the reviewer went to a totally different play than I had read. One that particularly stands*

out for me was Ray Conologue's review[1] of Sky. *He talked about Jasper belonging to some local religious sect and then called it "a tale of rural obsession". Did he try to categorize it because of the setting?*

Gault: Yup. I find it a big problem. Reviewers sometimes think they're critics when they've only seen the play once. Maybe they've gone out for dinner and had quite a lot to drink before. Who knows? They just go and have one see at something and then they talk about it as if they studied it. I respect reviewers, and I think they should review things with a kind of gut instinct, but to talk about it in terms of developing the script is not exactly fair. But anyway, every playwright has complaints about that.

No, he was definitely trying to categorize it very hard in that review. That review came out either the same week or the week before the Iranians declared that Salman Rushdie was going to be killed. It was interesting to me that Ray Conologue said, "How can you believe in this kind of religious obsession in our day and age?" And here it is all over. It's all over. It really is. I was thinking, when I was writing *Sky*, of all the creepy new age stuff that I was beginning to hear about. That kind of obsession is the same.

Johnson: *It's not a rural obsession or an urban obsession?*

Gault: No. No, not at all.

Johnson: *Or a 1920's obsession?*

Gault: No. It's not set in any time or place. It's set in people's heads. And what interests me is the process of belief in that play. The one character denying any possibility of belief and the other trying very hard to believe and how that affects them.

...

Johnson: *You mentioned that* The Soft Eclipse *is going to be published by Blizzard, and once the play is published it exists in a public sense. Do you find that it's important to have presses like Blizzard?*

Gault: Yes, very much so.

Johnson: *Is there room for another press to be publishing more plays?*

Gault: I expect so. It surprises me how many plays sell, especially to places like libraries and schools. I think it's really important.

...

Johnson: *Is there a particular segment of the population that you would like to reach that you haven't been able to?*

Gault: We're kind of in a strange situation here in Regina. There's only the one theatre, and they're in very bad shape financially. They took quite a risk last year, or a so-called risk, in putting on a few Canadian plays. They are putting on some more Canadian plays this year, so I'm very pleased about that, but their audience, traditionally,

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[1]Ray Conologue, "Intensity Wears Thin in Rural Tale," The Globe and Mail 15 Feb. 1989: C7. Conologue describes *Sky* as "an intense rural play about intensely twisted rural lives," and a story of "rural obsession." He calls Jasper, "an adherent of some strange local sect."

or at least in the last several years, hasn't been the kind of audience that is probably the best audience for my plays.

The director of my play, Don Kugler, got some high school classes in to see it. That was really great. I was really pleased. Some of them saw a rehearsal and others came to the preview night. Quite a few of them came back and saw it later in the run, as a class or individually. They really liked *The Soft Eclipse*. I had really good reviews from high school students, and that was something that I hadn't really thought about, although there are high school students in the play. There's this sort of love thing that goes through the play. So they really, really liked it. And I had some really good comments, especially from young girls on that play.... They had really good discussions over this kind of stuff. So that really pleased me.

I think it would really appeal to a younger audience and a university audience. I think that the plays are little explorations of a certain little world, and I'd like the audience to be explorers. Students should be explorers, so that segment of the population would appeal to me a lot.

Johnson: *People who are interested in taking the time?*

Gault: Yes, rather than just wanting entertainment. About a month after *The Soft Eclipse* was over, I was having supper in Alfredo's, which is a restaurant in the same building as The Globe. There were two women and I could hear them talking about The Globe Theatre. One was a woman from Regina and the other used to live here but had moved to Calgary or Vancouver. So she said to the other woman, "Did you go to any of the Globe's plays this year?" So of course, I started to listen. And the woman said, "Oh no, I didn't go to any of them, you know, they're all Canadian." This other woman said, "Yeah, well, anyway in Regina it isn't the thing to do. In Calgary, for an evening out you go to the theatre and then you go out for a late supper, but it just isn't 'in' in Regina." The funny thing is, that is who goes to the Globe a lot: people who do it for a social occasion or do it for entertainment. So I don't think it's the best audience for these plays, although I think they're entertaining and I think they had good audience response. But that's not their main thing.

...

Johnson: *Do you have any influences? Who do you watch and read?*

Gault: I don't read very many plays. I haven't seen very many plays because there's only one theatre in town. I go to Saskatoon once in a while. I get to Toronto once a year. I've read Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov. As far as contemporary writers go, I don't find a connection to most contemporary plays. I think that's one of the other reasons that I like to write plays. I don't really find anybody writing the kind of plays that I really want to see or read. I'm sure there are people doing it, I just haven't found them. I haven't clicked with them. I need to explore, I suppose, but I'm not very fond of reading plays. I get impatient. My own plays I can fully imagine, but somebody else's I can't.

...

Johnson: *Do you feel that your writing has a feminist or female or feminine sensibility and if so, what does that mean to you?*

Gault: Yeah, I think it does. That's one of the reasons why I can't really name any playwrights. So many of them are male. I can admire a play by Beckett or someone like that, but it doesn't influence the way I want to write a play. Maybe some people find influences within their own generation of people, but I find somehow that you backtrack,

you feel like going back to some more rooted things. But you look back 50 years ago and there weren't woman playwrights. Very, very few. Whereas in fiction, you can go back to the 19th century novels and so on.

I definitely think it's female, feminine and feminist writing. That doesn't mean that's necessarily the best thing. I would probably say that the best voice for a writer is an androgynous voice, as Virginia Woolf would always say. On the other hand, I haven't accomplished that, so I think it's a woman's voice that speaks through the plays.

Johnson: *My impression of* The Soft Eclipse *was that the world was from a female point of view. A lot of the play was comprised of different female points of view.*

Gault: That's right.

Johnson: *And that's partly because there's only one male character.*

Gault: Yeah. But I think that that's what a feminist play is, isn't it? It's a play with women characters who live in a kind of world that they don't quite have control of. I guess nobody has control over their world, but you could say that these women don't even have control over their own lives, which is what they're struggling for. So in that way, I think it's quite a feminist play.

Johnson: *Where did the play come from? How did it start for you?*

Gault: It started out as a novel about a day in a small town. It was going to be a kind of impressionistic novel. I started writing it about five years ago. I got so interested in the characters, I went back. That's where the story for *Sky* came from, it had the same root....

Johnson: *The settings are quite different.*

Gault: The worlds are totally different. I believe that you create your own world to a certain extent. It's very subjective. The world of Blanche and Jasper is created by them. The world of these women is created by them. To a certain extent, the forty-five years in between them has something to do with that. But it's larger. It's all where you put your eyes, as Sesame Street used to say. [She laughs] A great influence on me, I watched it with my kids.

Johnson: *One thing that I noticed from reading reviews of* The Soft Eclipse *is that a lot of the reviewers liked to grab onto the fact that the eclipse was symbolic. Then they would proceed to give their interpretation of what it was a symbol of.... So I wanted to ask you, what, for you, the eclipse "symbolized"? I want your opinion on it.*

Gault: Ohhhh yes. You know, I don't mean to write symbolic plays. I don't set out to create symbols. I wish I didn't, too, because they really cause a lot of trouble.... I got the idea to call it *The Soft Eclipse* from that particular poem of Emily Dickinson's. And that poem is all about marriage. It's a lovely little poem and I deliberately don't quote the whole thing at the front of the play, because it narrows the symbolism of the eclipse. But the poem is an ironic one in which the speaker is a wife. To paraphrase it, she says, "Well, I'm a wife now and this is okay. If this is comfort, then what was that I had before, when I was just a girl? How strange the girl's life looks behind this soft eclipse of marriage, or this soft eclipse of giving your love to someone and letting him take over your life." So she ends up being totally ambivalent on the state of marriage. Well, I shouldn't say totally. It actually sounds like she thinks she might have been better off

before. When I remembered that poem, I thought, "This is perfect for this play because this is what these women are dealing with."

....The eclipse to me was sexual. Definitely. And kind of a surrender for women to a sexual need, which also means to a natural need. So surrendering to nature. When it all gets dark, what do you do? You have to live through it until it's done. And then I guess, to me, there's links to death through that too. So in a bigger sense, it's sort of all of nature: women have to submit to their nature of being mortals and of being women.

Johnson: *It comes back to the rhythms of the moon and all of that.*

Gault: Yeah. So anyway, that's my interpretation.

Johnson: *So Mrs. Currie is mistaken in some ways when she says, "No one needs a man."?*

Gault: She doesn't believe that herself. Obviously. Because she's talking all the way through the play about Harold and her knapsack that she's wearing. So she obviously needed a man and she still needs his memory at least. I think the play is sort of like: "You can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em." I think that's the basis of that whole ambivalence of the play. It's just different women's reactions to their needs.

...

Johnson: *I find the play incredibly entertaining. There's so much humour in your characters. Do you do that deliberately or does the humour come out of creating a world?*

Gault: When I write short stories, they're almost always never funny because my own voice comes over and makes everything really depressing. But when I write characters, I just enjoy them so much that I start hearing them and they say silly things. People do all the time. And I think it's just enjoyment of them: letting them loose in the things they say.

Johnson: *Theatre is a freeing way of writing?*

Gault: Yeah. That's right. After having two plays produced in one year, I was thinking I would never write another play. For a while, to preserve my own sanity, I thought I would write plays because they're so much fun and so free, and then I would just translate them into novels. So I wouldn't have all the external stuff that you deal with as a playwright that you don't have as a writer. All the business stuff, all the media stuff, all the publicity and the publicness of it wouldn't be there. I could just do the same thing only translate it into fiction. I still might.

Johnson: *What a great idea.*

Gault: Yeah. Because it's really, really hard to get plays produced. There's a book of interviews, I'm sure you've read, of Canadian playwrights: *The Work*. It's got almost all men, there's about three women in it. I think one of the reviews of it said, "Oh yeah. A book about playwrights whining or something." It is kind of whiny, but I remember one of the women in there saying, I don't know who it was, saying that she's known women playwrights who have given up after having one or two plays produced because they just couldn't stand it. It's just so hard. You make yourself really vulnerable and women haven't been - in our society - raised to deal with the kind of stuff that you take.

First of all, selling it, not just getting people to produce it, and then dealing with all the - even the positive stuff is hard on you. And so I can understand that because it's what I was thinking. It's really hard. You've got a family and it takes so much out of you. You lose so much energy into it.

Johnson: *There are so many things that go into producing a play that a playwright has to deal with. So many components. So what becomes easier when you're writing fiction? Is it that you can write it in isolation?*

Gault: Yeah. Certainly the process of sitting in your den takes a lot longer. And then when you do send it off to a publisher, it's like "take it or leave it" for the most part. Some editing will be done on a book, but when you work with an editor - at least in small presses, I don't know if this is true of every press - it's usually the editor's opinion that this is your book. It's your vision. I've edited some books and that's how I operate, but it's not the same with theatre.

Johnson: *Especially in new plays.*

Gault: Everybody has an opinion on your new play. Not just everybody in the theatre, but every single person who's seen the play. At every stage, there's an opinion. And they feel duty-bound to tell you.

Johnson: *Well, I noticed in doing this project the number of reviewers who feel compelled, after seeing it once, to give suggestions on how the script should be changed. It astonishes me. The whole idea of new play development is based on the notion that something has to be changed.*

Gault: Of course, that's the premise. And then behind that, is the idea that some people have, that theatre is totally collaborative. Well, I don't think it's collaborative one bit. I've watched directors work and I don't think they collaborate with anybody. They rule the show to tell you the truth. They may be more or less democratic, but they're not collaborating with the actors.

Johnson: *They're using them as instruments?*

Gault: Exactly. And it doesn't bother me, if it doesn't bother the actors. That's their business. But this bit about "theatre is collaborative" is something you tell the playwright when you want her to change her script.

Johnson: *Does it come back to the problem of everyone competing to put their own vision onstage, rather than staging the playwright's vision?*

Gault: I've had the good fortune to work with people who have been really committed to the play, who have really, really tried hard to work with the vision of the play and to some extent have succeeded. It may be impossible to succeed %100. I guess it could be. It's really impossible, when you think about it, to put on a play. You're going against every odd. All the odds.

Johnson: *I find it interesting that you say that your short stories aren't funny, and yet your plays have humour.*

Gault: ....There was no humour in the story that *Sky* came from. The humour that is there simply came from the same technique of freeing the characters to talk. I don't know. I haven't read the play since it was produced. I can't bear to. I can't read any of

my stuff after it's done. As long as I'm still working on it, I'm okay, but once it's published I can't really change it. Once it's published, I figure you might as well give up on it.

Johnson: *It's like you said: it exists on it's own.*

Gault: It does exist then. And there's no point in really fooling around with it in that form anyway. You might choose to try something new with it, but you wouldn't want to keep going with it. So I don't know. In many ways I'm really dissatisfied with *Sky* as a script.

Johnson: *In what way?*

Gault: I guess maybe it's the same kind of dissatisfaction that you would have with anything. You had at one time a perfect vision of this play and it really can't be that. But I think it's a bit more than that. It might have just been that it was my first play, and I was really conscious of making it into "a play", but I feel that I kind of let the subject down somehow. I don't think it does what it should do. But it's there. It's done.

Johnson: ....Sky *isn't necessarily a play about incest or sexual abuse, but was this a subject that interested you?*

Gault: I wasn't really interested in incest as subject matter, but rather in this character and her turning something that happened in her life into a world-making event. So that's why it starts where it does, although I kind of short-changed her. I guess this is one of the things that I was talking about. I don't think that people understand Blanche as a character. She is so tough and so sarcastic and so mean to Jasper sometimes, that people just think she's terrible. I don't think that myself. I have a lot of sympathy for her, and the kind of sympathy that I would like people to have for her, isn't pity, but rather understanding of her situation.... It's a threatening subject, not just the incest, but also the Christianity thing. The little Christian world that they invent fails. Everything fails at the end. Some people say they find it depressing. I think they're offended, so they translate it into being depressed. I don't set out to offend people, or to shock people or anything like that, but I don't mind offending people that are complacent.

...

Johnson: *What's in store for you as a writer?*

Gault: I don't really have any big project that I'm working on right now. I'm doing a lot of little things right now. Mostly fiction. I'm writing quite a bit of fiction right now, and I might write another play some day.

Johnson: *And then turn it into a short story?*

Gault: Yeah. I might turn it into a short story. Well, I imagine I will write another play. The way I feel now, I probably will. I have the nucleus of a third play but I haven't figured out what to do with it, so I haven't done anything with it. So I expect someday I'll either work on that, or another idea will come to me.

The two plays have really come from some characters and their situations. That's where they begin. I don't find myself very inspired by ideas. If I have an idea in the back of my mind, it waits until there's a character who clings to it for a while. Then I can write it. Right now, I have this feeling that I'd love to write a play about all this new age stuff, and about all these beliefs.

Johnson: *It's fascinating.*

Gault: It's quite scary really, I think. I don't know very much about it. I've only read a little bit in pieces here and there, but some of the premises that some of that stuff is based on really bothers me. So that intrigues me. It's a way of looking at things that avoids looking at them.

BARBARA SAPERGIA grew up in Toronto. She earned an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Saskatchewan in 1964 and a graduate degree in English from the University of Manitoba in 1966. She has written in various forms (fiction, poetry and drama) and for various forums (film, television, radio and stage). Her first play, *Lokkinen*, was produced by 25th Street Theatre in 1982. Since then, she has written for both young and adult audiences and has been produced by Persephone Theatre and 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon and Wheatland Theatre in Regina. Sapergia attended the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1982 and 1988 and served as the playwright-in-residence at Persephone Theatre from 1985 to 1986. She is a member of many provincial and national writer's organizations. She has recently received a grant to write *The Girl from God's Country*, a film-script about Nan Shipley.

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Interview with **BARBARA SAPERGIA**, Saturday, June 23, 1990

I talked to Barbara Sapergia in the living room of her small Saskatoon home, where she lives with her writer-husband Geoffrey Ursell. Between the two of them, they seem to have a hand in everything: from publishing fiction and being on the executives of various writing organizations, to having their own work developed and produced. Sapergia talked to me about the Saskatchewan arts community, the need to encourage Canadian work, and the lure of other media. Later, wandering around the small city core, I understood why people settle here and don't leave. Saskatoon tastes dusty, smells like hashbrowns, and even the buildings are flat. But on a clear day, the lines connecting artist to artist can be seen stretching out for miles on end.

Lise Ann Johnson: *You started out by writing poetry and fiction. How did you begin writing drama?*

Barbara Sapergia: Several things came together. I've always been a writer who wanted to try different forms.... One of the things that contributed to it was that my husband Geoffrey Ursell started to write plays.... He had a lot to contribute to me, and I was sort of surprised to find that I had something to contribute back. I could say, "I think you could trim here or here."

Johnson: *Is that helpful, having a husband who's a writer?*

Sapergia: It's wonderful. It's incredible because you have constant support and understanding. Many spouses, however well-intentioned, can't figure out what you do, why you're doing it, why it takes so damn much time, and why you think it's the most wonderful thing in the world. That person understands what you're doing. They can offer you help and support, and keep you from getting discouraged if you get a rejection or something. It's terrific.

...

Johnson: *When did you start writing plays?*

Sapergia: Somewhere about 1980, I started to get into playwriting. I think I finished *Lokkinen* about 1981. It was produced in 1982, which was through the efforts of Ruth Smillie who is now at Catalyst [Theatre in Edmonton]. I had submitted the script to 25th Street. They discussed doing it in their regular season for a long time, but finally Ruth got funding to do it for a woman's festival in Regina and that's where it was done. She did quite a heroic effort at pulling a production together with almost no money: she cast it, she directed it, she did a lot of odd jobs. I actually remember helping her paint part of the set at the last minute when she decided it didn't look right....

Johnson: *Do you think it would have been done otherwise?*

Sapergia: It's hard to say. It came really close a couple of times. They were going to do it for another festival and then something else came along. I would hope that it would have eventually got done, but you never know.

Johnson: *Do you find it helpful to have festivals which produce women's work or new plays?*

Sapergia: Absolutely. I've just come through one. *Roundup* was done in Festival '90, which is dedicated to new Saskatchewan works. Three people got done. In some ways you could argue that individual plays might have gotten more attention on their own, but I think that group things are also very helpful in getting media attention for all the plays. There isn't, in my opinion, nearly enough play development being done properly with a real intention to production in this country, so if a theatre's brave enough to do it, anything that they can use to help draw attention to customers is really important.

...

Johnson: *Tell me about the differences between writing fiction and writing theatre in terms of what one offers you that the other doesn't. What do you find appealing about writing for the theatre?*

Sapergia: There's one thing that's both a plus and a minus depending on the theatre: it's much more collaborative, you're not just all on your own. Not necessarily early in the process, but certainly when you get into production, other people have an impact on your work. For a lot of people, that would just be an unbearable interference.... If you're not prepared to deal with that, I don't think it's possible.

Johnson: *Do you enjoy that collaborative process?*

Sapergia: I by and large do enjoy it very much. Sometimes it can be painful if someone wants you to do something and you're not sure that it's right, but the plus side is that people have all these skills that you don't have and all these ways of creating an imaginative realization of something that you've merely pointed at.

...

Johnson: *Can you write in isolation?*

Sapergia: Yes, to a point. But you don't want to go too far in isolation with a play. I think that relatively early in the process, when you have a really strong draft, you should hear it and see it. You should have a cold reading at least, just so you can get a feel for how it is working. With a novel, though, you can write your whole novel for yourself. Nobody else has to see it.

Johnson: *What's an ideal working situation for you, if you've written a new play, from the time you write it up to the time it's produced?*

Sapergia: I like to have access to some kind of resource that can give me cold readings when I need them, and as soon as is appropriate, maybe a more in-depth reading for a day.

I may as well use the most recent process I've gone through which was with Tom Bentley-Fisher at 25th Street, which was really beneficial. I had a first workshop in 1986, and then he had given me comments on it over a period of a couple of years. Over the last year, we worked on it intensively. We would have sessions where we would spend several days in a row, the two of us just reading through the scenes, scene by scene, making little cuts and transitions.... So by the time we finished doing that, I

had a really strong draft. It's important to have the time to do it with someone who is interested and committed to the work. And that is what happened in this case.

And then in the rehearsal process itself, I certainly want to be able to go to rehearsals, but I don't go to every single one. I think it's really good to give the actors and director a break from your presence.... If you go away for a few days and come back, it's a lot easier for you to appreciate the differences and changes.... Assuming that the process has been good and that you feel good about how it's going, you have to allow for its momentum and growth as well. Occasionally that leads me to accept things that I'm not sure are right, but then who is sure in the end? You have to give them the freedom to try stuff and sometimes parts of things do fail....

Johnson: *In terms of developing new plays and offering new writers a process that is helpful to them, how would you compare the theatre community in Saskatoon and Regina to theatre communities elsewhere?*

Sapergia: I don't want to evade that question, but I would like to say a few things by way of background. As you know, throughout Canada, playwrights are feeling the scarcity of opportunities for either production or development. There's an awful lot of development and workshopping being done in theatres that never leads anywhere. And in some cases, there's a feeling from playwrights and others that maybe there was never any intention that it would lead anywhere. Sometimes it seems to be done for it's own sake, or done in a vacuum without any real intention of going anywhere.

In 1982, a number of people, headed by a woman called Marine Mendenhall - I think it was originally her idea - decided that we needed a playwright's group to do workshopping. There was nothing happening by way of new play development. Rex Deverell was the writer-in-residence at The Globe Theatre and really the only plays that got developed were his. They were so committed to Rex's work that there really was not an openness to other Saskatchewan writers. There was some openness to producing other Canadian playwrights that were more established, but no real interest in Saskatchewan playwrights. Then there was Persephone, which really didn't have much of a development programme, although it had pioneered Ken Mitchell. And then there was 25th Street which did quite a bit of development. They started in the collective tradition and had a nucleus of writers which tended to be very hard to break into.

What playwrights wanted was something which would be responsive to the needs of playwrights and which wouldn't immediately be subject to the constraints of what's needed for the production. In other words, a theatre has to think in certain ways if it is workshopping prior to an actual production, but what the playwright needs in their development stage is maybe something quite different. Also, any particular theatre tends to have a spectrum of things that it's interested in, or spectrum of people that they're interested in. We wanted something here where anybody who was seriously working as a playwright could have some access to. It wouldn't say: "We don't think your idea is interesting, we don't want you to write this kind of a play." It had to be inclusive. So the Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre was started about '82. We did workshopping at different times during the year. We would have a lot of cold readings, and then in the early part of the new year, we would have an intensive two or three days of workshops. And out of that process came what's now called the Spring Festival of New Plays. I think we've had seven or eight of them now. I've been workshopped in three of them.

...

Johnson: *Does the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre also give you a community, not just a process?*

Sapergia: Oh yeah. The Writer's Guild community pre-dates it and most of us that are in the Playwright's Centre are also in that, although not all. So yes, it gives you a very strong support community. It helps to let playwrights get to know some of the actors, which I think is good because a lot of first-time playwrights really have no connection with theatre, so they don't know how to talk to actors.

...

Johnson: *Is it hard for someone new to break into the community?*

Sapergia: I don't think it's really very difficult. The Saskatchewan Playwright's Centre isn't very intimidating. It's quite accessible. Marina [Endicott] is quite open. She acts as a kind of first screening, but we also have a committee of playwrights. I think it's important to stress that playwright control is very important. It means that the focus will always be on the script. I think Playwrights Workshop Montreal is another example of a producing entity where the focus is still on the writer and the script, and not so much on the production. To me, the existence of something where real nurturing and development is the goal is terribly important.

Johnson: *How does that compare to what you know of play development in other provinces?*

Sapergia: To me, the most fortunate people will be people who have access to one of those kinds of processes. There's MAP in Manitoba, which I think was also born out of a frustration and a feeling that theatres weren't doing anything for them. MTC [Manitoba Theatre Centre] has given almost no support to local women. PTE [Prairie Theatre Exchange] has made an impressive effort, but I sense that they're doing less of it. Still, there's just not enough opportunity in those two theatres. So I'm really encouraged by playwright-run or playwright-oriented organizations.

In Saskatchewan, I think Saskatoon is the most supportive of new writing, because 25th Street has reaffirmed its mandate toward Saskatchewan playwrights. They haven't just said they're going to do it, they've actually done something, and that trend should be encouraged because we all know that it's really hard to develop any new play. It takes more energy and funds and time than it does just to do revivals or classics. I think it's so important that we find mechanisms to fund these things, because they're doing a different job than the so-called regional theatre which thinks its job is to be a smorgasbord of theatre, which means British and American stuff with a bit of Canadian thrown in. That has its particular challenges, but it doesn't involve this incredible labour-intensive activity that development is.

Johnson: *Do you think more funding is needed?*

Sapergia: Absolutely. We're in a difficult situation because theatre is labour intensive no matter what you're putting on. It's costly. It is highly subsidized, and yet the tragic thing is that it's still too expensive for some people to see. You don't exactly have to be rich, but for any family that's struggling to make ends meet, how are they going to find $10-$15 for theatre tickets, especially if they have to get a babysitter? And if you happen to be unemployed or on welfare, as increasing numbers of Canadians unfortunately are, there's just no money for that. I think theatres should start looking at more pay-what-you-can-performances just to get more people out.

...

Johnson: *Where are Persephone and 25th Street, and how would you characterize their audiences?*

Sapergia: Persephone is way out west, across the river, in a renovated little church.... It's very nice but it's far away from downtown. Anybody who doesn't have a car can't go, so that's keeping people away. They have a very middle-class audience, and they tend to keep telling themselves, "We can't do that because our audience won't like it." That's my interpretation. I think the more you do that, the more you condition your audience to say, "No, we don't like this."

25th Street is sort of on the north fringes of downtown in a warehouse. It doesn't look like a theatre. It's a bunch of buildings thrown together: two-storey, boxy buildings. It's part of this large complex. Its problem is that it's only got a 150 seat capacity, and unless you do one or two handers it's really hard to make any money, even if you can sell tickets.

Johnson: *What is its audience like?*

Sapergia: Well it certainly crosses over with the Persephone audience. There's quite a strong core of people in Saskatoon who will go to just about anything and everything, but I think 25th tends to have more university people and artists of all kinds. So it would tend to be slightly less middle class. There's a middle-class core there too, but it's a little funkier.

Johnson: *Is theatre going in Saskatoon elitist? You talked about ticket prices being high.*

Sapergia: To a degree. A large portion of people just couldn't consider it. If I have another production, I'd like to explore the idea of a free matinee or a pay-what-you-can on Sunday, and really try to get people out.

Johnson: *Are you interested in reaching that population that doesn't go to the theatre?*

Sapergia: Yeah. Not only people who don't come for money reasons, but who don't come for other reasons as well. For my play *Roundup*, it was crucially important. I would really have liked large numbers of farm people to have come. Not because it was only important to them, but it was important to them as a validation of what's happening and it's a way to expressing emotions about that. To just feel: "Oh my God, somebody's actually paying attention to me." Maybe it can't do anything or change anything but it's been recognized. And maybe it could even become a kernel of discussion that could lead to other things. It can't answer the problems, but it might help. I feel that even ten years ago we had more of a sense of collective discourse about topics like this in Saskatchewan.

Because there wasn't enough money, there was no way to tour it to all the Saskatchewan towns, which I would have loved. I also have the terrible sense that things are so bad now. The feeling among a lot of people is: "what would be the point?" It's hopeless, things are pretty hopeless. A lot of people do have emotional difficulties from this whole farm thing. So that's one thing: the ability to tour. We can reach a new audience that way, what we might call the small town or rural audience.

Then there's another level to it: Saskatoon and Regina are both mounting productions. They're roughly 116 miles apart. I think it's just madness that those productions aren't exchanged. Maybe not all of them, but one or two a year should be exchanged and there should be money in place to do that. I know that The Globe and 25th Street have talked a little about that, but nothing much has happened. I think they're

starting to be a little more interested. This new Artistic Director at The Globe, Susan Ferley, perhaps she will get interested in doing it. So we want more touring and more exchanges.

...

Johnson: *What do you want people to walk away from your plays with?*

Sapergia: I guess I want my plays to create both feeling and thought in people. But the feeling has to be primary. I'm really comfortable working with the emotions of the situation.... I guess a lot of people say that entertainment is the first goal, and if you really define that widely enough - entertainment as engagement of human beings - I guess that would be my goal.

Johnson: *A lot of your plays are set either specifically in Saskatchewan or in general have a prairie setting. Do you think it's important for people in your audience to have a connection to that land? Is it important for your audience to be able to immediately connect to the landscape or the characters or the setting?*

Sapergia: Well, yes and no. I think it's good that plays with those connections are written and done. And I write some of them. But I certainly don't want to suggest that that's a requirement either for me or for every writer. We have good writers here now that don't happen to set anything in Saskatchewan. For myself, I feel that the work I've done so far doesn't completely reflect what I am and what I want to do, because a lot of it is very realistic and yet I don't feel in any way bound by that. One of my plays, which is not yet produced is a farce and very non-realistic. And I loved doing that. It's really hard on me that I haven't been able to get it produced yet, although I've come close and had a radio work done of it.

I certainly don't want to place limitations on myself or anybody else about content or style or form. At the same time, a lot of my subjects either demand it or call it forth. With this farm thing, there probably would be some different or experimental way to do it, but probably not for this audience.... I think it's really good that there are plays that are like that and the audience can relate to them, but I also hope that if I do something totally different, the audience can also follow me and say, "Oh we liked her other plays," and then just go with it....

I really despise critics who say that something is only realism or that realism isn't valid anymore. I think that's stupid. To me, it's just what's appropriate for the idea, and also what turns you on as an artist. If you don't want to write a realistic play, God forbid that anyone should make you, but if that's what's working for the artist, it really annoys me that some people would think that's not valid. I just want them to look at the work.

Johnson: *Do we need better critics?*

Sapergia: We need better critics and more infrastructure to support them. It tends to be a thankless job that somebody gets shoved into, rarely something they're prepared for. They're just sort of thrown into it and asked to do the best they can. A lot of the people around here that do it are good humoured and good intentioned, but still, they don't have any particular training in it.

In places like Toronto, there can be a terrible snobbery to it where the critic has to show that you have to get up very early in the morning to pull the wool over his or her eyes. Usually his. "Don't think you can fool me." Which is a very corrosive attitude to take into a theatre. A person, including a critic, should go into a theatre waiting to be and hoping to be thrilled, amazed, awakened, overjoyed, and generally put through the

wringer. It's sort of like, "God, I've got this reputation to protect," and you've got your defenses up when you walk into the theatre. I particularly don't like it when they come to the West just to find, apparently, that there isn't anything here. Nothing outside Toronto is worth looking at.

Johnson: *Is it easy to have a reviewer from* The Globe and Mail *come and not be aware of the context of the play?*

Sapergia: Very much so. I just get the sense that if it's not something they can relate to right away, they think it mustn't be right. Just as if you were going into another country, it wouldn't hurt to orient yourself a bit with what's going on. I think this is just as unusual a place to live as another country, but they don't feel any need to worry themselves. They just think they have a standard, which you might call a Toronto standard, and there is no other standard. And that's silly.

Johnson: *It's a bit of an illusion to call* The Globe and Mail *a national newspaper in that sense. You can't have a national critic based in Toronto.*

Sapergia: I'll give you my theory of regionalism. Some people think there are centres of excellence, like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and then there are the regions. Whereas I think of everything as regions. To me, Toronto is a very interesting region.... I think you have to do a good thing where you are, have the highest standards that you possibly can, but to measure yourself against another place I find really destructive and pointless.

Johnson: *Does that make it feasible to take plays out of regions and produce them elsewhere?*

Sapergia: If you make a commitment to stay in a place like Saskatoon, which I've done, I think it makes it harder to get your plays accepted elsewhere, to get them produced. I hope that sooner or later, the accretion of the body of work that I do, will gradually allow this to happen without having to move to Toronto. I would rather try to do it from here. Even though I don't only write about Saskatchewan and I don't want to only write about Saskatchewan or the West, it's a very nurturing environment for me. I love the scale of things here in Saskatoon and this is where I think I can work best. I might go away for a period of time but this is my base.

...

Johnson: *Why aren't there as many new women's plays being produced? Are there not enough women writing?*

Sapergia: No, I don't think it's that.... It doesn't seem to be that we're not out there in sufficient numbers or writing plays in sufficient numbers, but there does seem to be a real bias operating. Part of it is similar to the bias against Canadian plays in general which is: "If it's ours, will it be good?" And then if a woman wrote it, that compounds it. It's like two kinds of prejudices. And then I guess if you're in a non-fashionable minority, that would be three times compounded. If you're not "flavour-of-the-month".

Johnson: *Do you feel that your experience working as a playwright is any different from a male playwright?*

Sapergia: I think that it is on some objective level. It doesn't mean that you feel it all the time. Having the Playwright's Centre is a kind of important equalizer because it

certainly doesn't discriminate between men and women. Some years I think we have more women than men. Essentially we're just looking for scripts that we can put in that festival, that are ready to go in there, and I'm sure there hasn't been any bias in that way. So having that has helped.

Let's say that I've had more sense of an overt prejudice against Canadian plays than I have had against women's plays. That doesn't mean that it's not operating, it's just maybe less expressed. But there's this fear of the Canadian and the fear of the woman. And on what level that's operating would depend on different artistic directors. Every now and then you meet one that loves new things. Not very often.

Johnson: *Unfortunately. Do you consider yourself a feminist playwright?*

Sapergia: Yeah, I do.

Johnson: *What does that mean to you?*

Sapergia: I'm glad that you asked me to define it, because it means different things to different people. By illustration, Diane Bessai did an article in that CTR called something like "Women, Feminism and Theatre in the Prairies"[1]. She had just seen my play *Matty and Rose*, which is about three black porters on the CPR in the '40's.... Diane didn't feel that that was a feminist play particularly and she didn't include me in that article.[2] Well, that really bothers me because I don't believe a feminist play is just a play about women or so-called women's issues. I think I would put it more in terms of the term that you used of "a female sensibility". I think that a play I wrote won't necessarily by style say "a woman wrote this," but I think I use the knowledge of what it's like to be a woman in our country and all that that entails. I am determined that a woman character will never just be a piece of furniture. To me, a feminist play is not just when the issues and the characters are obviously concerned with women or with the plight of women, but when a woman's consciousness and experience does inform it.

Now, I believe that a man who's really paying attention and doing his research could possibly do the same thing, and I think I can write good male characters as well. You don't grow up a woman in our society without learning something about men as well, and I think some men could and do do the same. I'm trying to think of the simplest common denominator. The women characters can never be sacrificed to any external ideas. They can't be caricatures, they can't be political conveniences, they must always be real characters....

Johnson: *I read an interview with Joan MacLeod, where, and this isn't against Nightwood, but she had sent her play* Jewel *to Nightwood and they rejected it because it wasn't feminist enough.*

Sapergia: At least they sent her a letter. They just swallowed mine up and never replied.

Johnson: *It's difficult when people say, "This is what's feminist."*

Sapergia: You're not politically correct enough.

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[1]Diane Bessai, "Women, Feminism and Prairie Theatre," Canadian Theatre Review 43 (1985): 28-43.

[2]To this charge, Bessai explains that she never saw *Matty and Rose*, and did not include Sapergia in the CTR article because she was writing a different article on Sapergia and other Saskatchewan writers entitled "Drama in Saskatchewan". For the full reference, see the Selected Bibliography on Sapergia.

Johnson: *Which can be destructive.*

Sapergia: It's funny. There's a lot of writers in this province who, because it's hard to make a living in any one area, tend to try their hand in different things. I've done radio, t.v., stage, fiction. I've more or less stopped doing poetry. But you tend to not think in terms of anything that limits the work. You tend to think of expanding outward in concentric circles. And for me it's the same in terms of subject and style. I don't accept that we have to be limited.

You've probably been following the debate that says we shouldn't write in voices of groups that we don't belong to: a white woman shouldn't write in the voice of a black character or whatever. I don't agree with that, although I certainly think there's room for sensitivity, particularly with native writers right now. They're just really burgeoning and it certainly wouldn't be wrong if there was a bit of a moratorium while these growing writers make their mark.

Johnson: *I also understand the suggestion that it can be a false representation.*

Sapergia: Yeah, it can. But I think you don't censor that, you criticize the hell out of it. You say, "This person did a terrible job." For instance, I don't think Bill Kinsella does a good job when he writes about native people. I think it's awful. But I don't think he should be sent to jail and I don't think he should be stopped. I think he should be criticized.

...

Johnson: *Is there much contact here between people who are working as playwrights and other artists, say musicians or visual artists?*

Sapergia: There is quite a bit. Among writers, strangely enough, there has been some separation. I find other writers more likely to be interested in my fiction than in my playwriting. Most writers didn't see it as something that would have an impact on them directly. If you would give a reading, writers would tend to come. If you had a play on, they might or might not come. The reaction was: "A play is something we go to when we're in New York." People couldn't seem to relate to it as much.

But there is a lot of cross-over between writers in general and visual artists. For instance, here in Saskatoon, there is a community of visual artists which is very supportive and a community of writers. They tend to overlap a lot. They know each other and get together a lot. Some of our closest friends are visual artists. In fact, you'll see some of their work on our walls. These are all painted by women, interestingly enough. We actually know more women artists here, although in Regina we know more men artists.

Johnson: *Is that important for you as an artist? To be able to have that cross-over?*

Sapergia: Mmhmm. Also because Geoff and I have been in this publishing company which is now sixteen years old. We must have done about 100 books and so we're constantly looking for covers. That's partly how we got into knowing so many artists: asking to see their work and being able to use them on covers. And we do have a lot of really good artists.

Johnson: *How does the publishing industry connect to all this? Do we need more publishing houses that do plays?*

Sapergia: Yeah. We do need more, and we need more of the existing ones to try it and as much as possible think of hooks, themes, etc that may help interest a market. For in-

stance, a school anthology. Our press is considering doing an anthology of Saskatchewan plays that could be used in both high schools and universities. I mean you do have to think in terms of a market and how to reach it.

...

Johnson: *How is the provincial funding situation here?*

Sapergia: ...Saskatchewan had the first Writer's Guild, and then Alberta followed maybe ten years after us, and then a few years later Manitoba. They are sort of patterned on Saskatchewan, and because we've been around longer, we've been able to get the funding base developed. Whenever I tell people how much money it has, I sort of quake, because I think, "If more people knew this, maybe they'd take it away." We have about $600,000, which is more than national organizations like PUC have.

Johnson: *That's phenomenal.*

Sapergia: About $100,000 of that is self generated and the rest is from various kinds of grants. The Playwright's Centre is funded mainly from that same source.

Johnson: *Is Manitoba, in your view, quite far behind that?*

Sapergia: I think it is. It doesn't mean there aren't fine writers there, but just in terms of the support programs, it doesn't have nearly as much money. On the other hand, they've come up with new ideas, including one that we're copying, called the Mentor Programme. That's a programme where a senior writer works with a more emerging writer over a four-month period.

...

Johnson: *Do you have anything in store for the future?*

Sapergia: I have a television project on *Roundup* on tap. I have to revise my treatment of it, and then I have to start the whole funding process to get money together for that. But we have some interest from a Saskatchewan television network, and they've put some money into development already.

Johnson: *Many people that I have talked to are working for film either as a way of making money or because working for film ended up being less of a hassle for them.*

Sapergia: Well it's certainly better paid when you can get paid to do it.

Johnson: *One woman I talked to in B.C. gave up writing for the theatre out of frustration and turned to film.*

Sapergia: I feel like that a lot. It hasn't happened yet but sometimes I feel it. When you put years of work into something and then not enough people can see it in that brief little time, that's why it's attractive to get into other media. It's not just a question of how much you get paid in film, but also that you got paid say in more than one area. Your royalties just aren't going to be much in small Prairie theatre, so if you can also do that piece on radio or somewhere else, then maybe you can start repaying the hours that went into it. But also, you just don't want your work wasted. You want a few more people to see it.

Johnson: *Especially if it can't be toured.*

Sapergia: The Canada Council has some money for touring, but you have to go beyond your province. I don't think they have anything for in-province touring. I think Saskatchewan would have to do that, but times are tough now and our current government has racked up a pretty astounding deficit, which makes it hard to get anything new for the arts. In fact, they've just cut back quite severely in this year's budget.

Johnson: *Is that the way of the future?*

Sapergia: I think either this fall or this spring, there will be an election and we will or will not have a change of government. If we don't have a change in government, I can't see the people we have giving more. I can't predict what the NDP would do if it gets in. I don't think it would cut it back. As much as I've been disquieted by our current government, the Arts Board has still survived. There are continuing rumours about their intention to either destroy it or incorporate it into the department of Culture and Recreation, which would mean that it would lose its arm's length relationship that it has always had. It runs itself and has its own jury, and the fear is that it would be incorporated into a department and be subjected to departmental control and political interference.... It is nice to have that arm's length. There hasn't been as much money to go around as has been needed, but the process is good. People have confidence in it. If you didn't get money, there could have been other, better projects. By and large, people don't feel hard done by.

CONNI MASSING grew up in the small central Alberta town of Ponoka. Following high school, she studied theatre arts at Red Deer College, where "there was a little tiny group of us who did whatever we wanted."[1] Massing later transfered to the University of Alberta where she completed a B.A. in Drama and an M.F.A. in Playwriting. Massing was involved in the early years of the Edmonton Fringe before she became the playwright-in-residence at Theatre Network. Her play *Gravel Run* premiered in Calgary at the ATP Playrites Festival in 1988 and was produced a year later by Theatre Network. Massing has written for two Citadel Teenfests, as well as for television and film. Her play *SkyGeezers* was produced at the 1992 Playrites Festival and at Theatre Network. Her latest script *Dustsluts* was included in the 1991-92 Workshop West season.

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[1]This quote is taken from material that was subsequently cut during the editing process.

Conni Massing shares her house in Edmonton with a friendly, odd-looking cat. Her house sits north of the Saskatchewan River, away from the trendy part of town, but very near Theatre Network where Massing is playwright-in-residence. Her living room, stacked with strange bits of furniture, is the chosen setting for the interview. Massing talks to me about the need for residencies, her desire to reach other markets, and her relative comfort within the Edmonton theatre community.

Lise Ann Johnson: *How did you become a writer?*

Conni Massing: ....I had a very interesting period in my life where I spent six months, mostly unemployed, with a very good friend of mine. We were two playwrights sitting around in an apartment watching game shows and eating Kraft dinner. It was really pretty pathetic. But then I got a job working for the government as a technical writer. I did report writing. They were very indulgent at this government job. As the amount of my playwriting activity increased, they were able to accommodate that by giving me time off. They were very, very good to me. That was sort of the first stage.

Then I got to a point where I decided that I wasn't getting enough writing done by working full time. To spend a whole day writing government reports and then to come home and sort of take off your pantyhose and your smart little gabardine outfit or whatever and try to do something creative, and still have some kind of social life. I was in a perpetual state of guilt and "I should have's".... I finally went to my boss there and said, "I can't do this anymore, is there any way that I can work around this?" I had a leave of absence to go to Europe and I said, "When I come back from Europe, is there any way I can work half-time?" So he sort of pulled all these strings and when I came back, he got me a half-time position with a raise. So I was actually making more money. It was very, very nice of him and I'll always remember him for that. It really helped me, gradually, get to a point where I could begin to freelance. So I did that for a couple of years. I worked half-time. I worked mornings for the government and then would go home and do my own writing in the afternoon.

I eventually got to a point where the writing activity had increased to the extent that it became an identity thing more than a time thing. I wanted to be able to say, "I write for a living," not "I work for the government and I write." Because then the assumption on other people's part and your own part is always that the writing is sort of a hobby. I reached a point where my identity couldn't cope with the notion that I was an adult and couldn't make a living doing what I supposedly did. That was about two and a half years ago. That transition was also aided by the fact that I went directly from the government to a residency at Theatre Network. So it was a little easier transition than quitting the government job and saying, "Okay, I have no work and I have no money, but here I am, so!"....

Johnson: *This is a general question and maybe it's too big to answer - but what is it that pushes you to write and why are you a writer?*

Massing: Well, I don't know. Hmm. It's something that I keep meaning to develop a stock answer to because you get asked that a lot, but it is really a difficult question. I don't know that I'm necessarily alone in this, I think other writers might agree with me - In a way, it's sort of a stress-causing question. [Massing feigns hyperventilation] Just because it's the kind of question that implies that every day when you get up and sit in

front of the computer there should be at least a spark of some burning desire to "communicate something". Those are the kinds of answers that writers are supposed to give about why they write. And that's certainly true. I think a lot of the clichés absolutely hold water....

Who knows what motivates this urge to communicate? What makes me think that I need to tell other people something? I think it's the same kind of instinct that makes people want to perform, only it's a different version of it. Perverse though it may be, I think there's some kind of desire to express, and to have a response to that expression. One of the most satisfactory ways that I've come up with of describing it is a need for empathy. I think sometimes you feel very strongly about a particular thing, so if you communicate that to a group of people and they respond to it, then it's a way of saying, "I feel very strongly that this is wrong. You feel the same way? Well then, if you do, then we're not alone. I'm not alone. You're not alone." It's a community-creating kind of thing. Or something. So. And that's all extremely selfish. You know? Because it makes me feel good. I only say that because I'm very wary of attaching any high-minded motives to it.

Johnson: *It is a really hard question because it assumes that writing is somehow not normal.*

Massing: That's exactly what it is. It feels like it puts some subtle pressure on you to have a good reason for what you do, or to be passionate about it. I mean, I think you do have to be passionate about it. Or why would you bother doing something like this for a living? I mean, really, it's a crazy way to try and make a living.

...

Johnson: *What was the experience of writing for the [Citadel] Teen Fest*[1] *like?*

Massing: ....The main reason I took it on was at the first meeting I had with Gail [Barrington-Moss, then Co-ordinator of the Teen Fest] she said, "We want you to write a big show for one of the big theatres." And I kind of went: "Ding!" The opportunity to write for as many characters as you want with absolutely no regard for economy of "we can only have five characters" was just a blast. When I finished the first draft, I had no idea how many characters I had. So that's why I agreed to do it. I wanted to write a huge show with tons of characters and big, big things happening, rather than intimate little moments in a little chamber piece.

...

Johnson: *Moving back to* Gravel Run, *I think there's an expectation that when you find a play set in the Prairies or in a rural setting, you're going to get a certain kind of play. You're going to get kitchen-sink drama. And* Gravel Run *really plays off of that. Was that conscious?*

Massing: It became very important to me that it not be - well, I'm looking for a more expressive way of putting it than "kitchen sink" - but there was a style that I really wanted to stay away from. I really wanted to emphasize the quirkiness and the weird dignity of these people, which I don't think derives from them being earnest and simple. It derives from the kind of character traits that you get from living in that environment. I

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[1]Massing wrote *Terminus* for the Citadel Teen Festival. At the time, the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton annually commissioned new works for their Teen Festival, a theatre festival geared specifically for teenage audiences.

don't think they're necessarily earnest or simple at all. It's according a different kind of respect or dignity to those kinds of people rather than portraying them as -

Johnson: *Simple?*

Massing: Well, yeah. I'm going against the belief that the smaller the centre you live in, the more guileless you are or something like that. You know what I mean? It sort of pisses me off because it's a condescending kind of thing.

Johnson: *It's an urban snobbism?*

Massing: Yeah. So I guess it was sort of conscious. Not every person that I grew up with is, of course, that eccentric, but I see the fun that I had in that environment while I was growing up and then going away and telling stories about it. The fun was derived from that particular kind of quirkiness and the grotesque aspects of that kind of society, not from the homey aspects of it....

Johnson: Gravel Run *was produced in Calgary, Saskatoon and Edmonton? Did you see any difference in response according to where audiences were from?*

Massing: Not really. See, this is one of the things I've been resisting in discussions with certain people since either of those productions: is some kind of belief that it doesn't go as well with an urban audience, or something. I just think that's absolutely wrong. Because most people come from somewhere. Pretty much the response that I always got was either "I know people just like that," or "I'm from a background just like that". All the time. No one ever said to me, "Gee, I enjoyed it for what it was, but it has so little relationship to my life. You have to understand that I grew up in Toronto so I can't understand what these people are like." No one ever, ever said anything like that to me. Ranging from people who are from Podunk, Saskatchewan - I shouldn't pick on Saskatchewan - who had grown up in a hamlet of 200 people on a farm with four brothers and sisters, right to people who seemingly had absolutely nothing in common with the background portrayed in that play. It got the same kind of response. Everybody has a mother. Everybody has a family. I actually got a letter from an artistic director, saying something along those lines: "I liked the play but I don't think it would go that well in this kind of environment because it's kind of a rural play."

Johnson: *That's strange.*

Massing: Warren [Graves] was saying, "Why don't you let me, just for fun, adapt the play so that it actually takes place in an ethnic neighborhood in Toronto or Montreal. Len, coming in from another environment, just comes in from another ethnic environment. Maybe he's sort of WASPish. It would have the same implications. Just let me do this whole adaptation and we'll set the whole thing in an ethnic neighborhood in Toronto and see if that makes a difference." He was mostly joking and I mostly took it as a joke, but in a way, it's almost tempting because I think the things that the play talks about are not exclusive to a small prairie town. Anyway. As you can see, it's sort of a sore point for me.

Johnson: *Joan MacLeod wrote a play called* Jewel, *which is set in Peace River. I read an interview with her. And it amazed me - the person interviewing her, who was from an urban setting, called the play "exotic".*

Massing: Hah!

Johnson: *Which says something about how people immediately react to setting. It's very strange.*

Massing: ...I know that people like reviewers and artistic directors are sort of in the business of second-guessing your audience. They have to do that, and I realize that that can be a very harrowing and terrifying experience for artistic directors: "What do people want? What will they laugh at? What will sell?" But I think quite often they just don't know, as is proven again and again and again. And I think that's one of the things that is almost impossible to predict: whether people want an urban play or a rural play, and how they would perceive or tell the difference between the two.

...

Johnson: *Do you have a sense of who is drawn to your work? Or does it really depend on what theatre is doing it?*

Massing: I think so. I don't even know. I think it depends very much on the theatre. The image of the theatre is very powerful in determining who's going to end up coming to the play. Their normal audience is subscribers. Yeah. I don't really know.

I used to have a better idea when I did more things at the Fringe. Because then you would see your audience every day. It's a very peculiar event in that respect. I would see who was lined up to see my play, and I would end up talking to them and seeing how many of them there were and what they looked like and how old they were. And then I would see them all the rest of the week, because they were at the Fringe too and we would run into each other and I'd find out exactly what they thought of it. You seldom have that opportunity to have that direct survey of your audience. I was probably more in touch with it there than anywhere else because of the nature of the Fringe. It's more of an open marketplace. Instead of Stan and Edna saying, "Well it's Wednesday and it's our night to go to Theatre Network. What are we seeing anyways?"

Johnson: *While we're on the subject of the Fringe: has that been important to your writing?*

Massing: I think it was important. I don't know if I could tell you exactly how and in what way. I think it's incredibly important for any new writer. Especially because it affords the opportunity. Most of the experiences that I have had at the Fringe have been incredibly positive in terms of how much fun we had doing the show and the kind of response we got. That was largely because of the kinds of shows that we did. Our musical [*BLT Down*] was very specifically written for the Fringe.

...

Johnson: *You mentioned that writing is quite solitary. Is it important for a writer to have a group to write for or work with?*

Massing: Oh. It's absolutely essential. I don't have a huge, burning interest in writing a novel. I think that probably the biggest reason I don't spend much time on those kinds of endeavours is that there's no social aspect to the work itself - i.e. rehearsal - and there's no social aspect to the finished product. It's really important. I love rehearsals because then finally we're all there and we're all having fun.

Johnson: *And you can see what works.*

Massing: Well yeah. After this long period of entrapment, of solitary confinement. To actually have warm bodies respond to it.

Johnson: *Where have you gotten that the most?*

Massing: The Fringe is great from an audience perspective.... It's fun if you get the hit mentality and people start lining up three hours before. That's an incredible rush. But probably the best thing at Theatre Network has been the process.

Johnson: *Can you tell me more about that?*

Massing: Well, to work with Dan Van Heyst [Resident Designer for Theatre Network] for instance. I get better as time goes on, but I don't think in visual terms. I don't think my visual images are very strong, so it's wonderful to have someone like Dan coming in, especially at an early point in the process, and to just go: "If I were going to design this, these are the images that I would pull out of the play to emphasize it." It's an incredible, incredible thing. Network always has designers involved in their workshop process and I think it's really great.

Johnson: *That's really useful.*

Massing: It's great for writers. Probably the two most useful things to any writer from a dramaturge is to a) have someone ask you the right questions, and b) have someone tell you what images were strong for them, with no inside judgment....

Working with Stephen [Heatley, Artistic Director of Theatre Network] has been incredible too. I think it's so important for writers to be attached to a theatre at some point in their life. To have some kind of relationship for a while, even if these things are temporary and they don't last forever. But to have that kind of support and that kind of environment to work in for a period of time. That's why residencies are so important.

Johnson: *What happens when you write a play for Theatre Network? What process do your plays go through?*

Massing: I think this might be a typical process: *Gravel Run*, for instance. I had a conversation with Stephen one day and he said, "What are you working on, because we would be interested in looking at it in some way, shape or form." Alberta Playwrights Network at the time had a grant programme modeled on Recommender Grants in Ontario, where you go to a theatre and they say, "Yup. This sounds like a neat idea to us. We recommend that this writer be supported to write this play." So I got some money to start the play.

So then I wrote a draft of it and they decided to include it in one of their workshop series. I think this is mostly true of theatres these days: I don't think there are a lot theatres now that are doing workshops for the sake of workshops. I think most people don't have enough money to dick around like that. They're doing workshops because they're interested in the play. So at that point in the process they decide whether or not this may be something they're interested in pursuing. And if they're interested enough to think that it has some development potential, then they agree to do a workshop of it, either a one-day workshop just to hear it, or a full process. So that happened a few months later. It was basically three weeks.... I actually rewrote about 60% of the play during that time period.

Then there was a public reading, which was also great at that point. You can sit around and talk about something forever, but the only thing that really accurately tells you if something is working - whatever that nebulous term is - is to have some kind of audience.... You have to see it with an audience.

Johnson: *You get to know it so well. You have to have someone see it that has never seen it before.*

Massing: Because the acid test is still: Is the audience engaged? Are they responding in the way that you thought they might? And the actors who have been working on it for the past two weeks just can't tell you that. So there's a public reading at the end and there's some response solicited from them, but I find that the audience at that point is more valuable just as an audience and not as critics. I really hate it when people are allowed to sort of talk. And they do. People love to do that: "Well what I thought. I tell you what I thought. I just thought that the second act really needed -" You know? This is based on one hearing. People just really get into it because they're given the opportunity to talk.

And then we met about three weeks after that. There's sort of a post-mortem, and then that was that. That's the whole process....

Johnson: *Your experience is a big contrast to people I talked to in B.C. One woman I talked to was living on Gabriolla Island. She wasn't hooked up to a theatre. It was a very solitary thing, and that was quite typical of the women I talked to in B.C. They just didn't have the ongoing theatre community they thought they could write for.*

Massing: Any writers that I talk to anywhere - with the possible exception of Toronto and I don't even know if that's true - are always stunned at the kind of network that is here, in this province, but particularly in this city for writers. And the kinds of opportunities there are for development: writing grants. There's more money available here for writers for grants and stuff than there is in other areas of the country. In B.C. there's just nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. That's one category: grants to writers, money to live, which is just so essential. Writers in this country can't exist just on royalties from their plays. God. You would starve to death. So there are various things. One of them is grants.

Another thing is residencies. That's another thing that people are always stunned at: that there seems to be any support for residencies here. Since Canada Council has sort of shut down that program - they no longer have a residency program - theatres have to find their own money for residencies. So people are always stunned that those kinds of programs exist here, or that there are people actually working in residence somewhere with some kind of connection to a theatre.

And then just the fact that there is such a high concentration of theatre people in a city like this, creates a real sense of community that you don't get in Vancouver, let alone Gabriolla Island. There's just not the community in Vancouver that there is here. There are down sides to that too, but there's always a feeling of lot's happening here: there are production opportunities, there are workshop opportunities, there are granting opportunities. There's lots going on to see and to participate in as an audience, even if it's not your play being done. You know what I mean? You're part of a community that's really, really active, and I think that's almost unique.

Johnson: *Is it unique to Edmonton?*

Massing: Yup. There's incredible disparity. The Maritimes and British Columbia seem to suffer particularly. It's pretty sad actually. There's just not the support and not the activity. And that's a vicious circle. The writers leave the Maritimes because there's nothing happening there. Or not as much happening. There's not the support, there's not the encouragement, there's not the potential for production, so they can't stay there.

...

Johnson: *My impression when I went to Toronto was that there was an incredible theatre community, but that it might be more difficult for a new writer to break into that community. Do you have any sense of whether that's the case or not, compared to Edmonton?*

Massing: I don't know. A couple of things: I don't think the importance of the Fringe should be underrated in terms of introducing new writers. I don't think there's anything comparable in Toronto. I know there are festivals that encourage new and interesting kinds of writing in Toronto, but there's nothing quite like the Fringe. I know people go on and on and on about the Fringe, but if you are a new writer, you want the chance to say, "Look, it's funny. Really, it is!" It's really hard to get people to read your work or pay any attention to you if you don't know them, unless you can get someone to see your show.... If you can get Gerry Potter [Artistic Director of Workshop West] to come to your show at the Fringe, maybe he is reasonably likely to say, "Listen, we have some SEED money, why don't we give you $500 and we'll do a workshop in the fall? It's a one-act now, but maybe it would make a good full length." That kind of stuff happens all the time.

If you're a new writer and you're just shopping a play around to theatres, it's almost impossible to get the kind of attention you need. Now, if it's sort of difficult to get that kind of attention here, imagine what it's like in Toronto. Stacks - hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and thousands of manuscripts arrive at any given Toronto theatre with a national profile. Hundreds of manuscripts! And you just get lost in the shuffle. So I think the Fringe is really important here for getting in as a new writer. So that's a difference between the two cities.

I think one other possible difference might be, that just given the nature of theatre - I don't mean to put it down to "it's who you know" thing - but it's always easier to get a foot in or have initial discussions with someone about your work if you feel more comfortable with them socially, or you have some kind of context for their work and they kind of know where you're coming from. Maybe they know a couple of your teachers because you've come out of U of A and they saw something you did. This community is more social because it is smaller and more condensed and compact than a theatre community in a city the size of Toronto. You're more likely to be able to get to know some of the people that you need to be able to approach unintimidated and say, "Hey, read my play." And somehow become connected to that theatre. Go and work three of their bingos or whatever. There's more opportunity to create those initial contacts. They're just so important, and at that level, I think it really is a matter of "who you know". I don't think for a moment that people's plays get done because they're friends with people, or that actors get hired because they know so and so. I don't think things operate that way. Professionally, I think most projects go on the merit of the project, but to get to a point where someone will even consider you for anything, sure, this is a much easier community to slip into.

...

Johnson: *Do you think of yourself as a Western Canadian before a Canadian?*

Massing: Yeah, I guess so. I identify very much with this province. More than I do with being a Western Canadian. I feel quite Albertan more than I feel Western Canadian.

Johnson: *Does that mean anything in terms of being a writer in Canada? Do you think there's an Eastern bias?*

Massing: Well. Yeah, but the same old stuff, it's nothing that you haven't heard before. I think there is a tendency in Toronto to see everyone else as the regions and that they're not really important. It doesn't matter how much goes on in Alberta and Edmonton, there's still an attitude in Toronto of: "Oh, something's going on out there?" It's not a huge problem. I just find it sort of annoying. It does sort of make me want to jump up and down and stamp my little feet sometimes and say, "There's a lot of really wonderful things going on out here." You sort of crave acknowledgment sometimes. So, yeah. I guess I have all the same typical complaints about Toronto attitude, but I don't really feel that I'm suffering from it. Do you know what I mean? It doesn't really seem to affect my life that much. I only just sort of find it vaguely annoying.

...

Johnson: *What do audiences want to see here?*

Massing: I think, for the most part, we have an incredibly sophisticated audience. There isn't as big a cross-over between Fringe audiences and regular subscription audiences as one might have hoped. There are a lot of people who will only go to the Fringe, and that's their dose of theatre. Be that as it may, the Fringe has given people a taste for off-beat, non-traditional theatre. I think it really has educated people's tastes to a large degree. It's created a real audience for things that might be seen as off-beat and fringy. I really think it has. People are happily and enthusiastically adventurous in the kinds of theatre that they'll see here.

I don't know if it's necessarily unique to here, but there used to be a time when to say that something was a) new and b) Canadian - I won't go as far as to say it was the kiss of death - but it was not necessarily a great advertising promotion. Maybe you didn't kind of want to say that. You kinda wanted to say, "Say it's new, but don't say it's Canadian." You kind of shied away from it. I feel that that has absolutely changed in this community over the last ten or fifteen years. A complete flip-flop. People at the Fringe and in regular subscription seasons eat up the new material. I think you could go and do "person-on-the-street" interviews at the Fringe, or during the regular season, and solicit a universally positive response to new plays and Canadian plays. And I think that's because of the work done at the Fringe. The most interesting stuff is always the new stuff. Someone's always trotting out Ionesco's *The Chairs* or something, and sometime's they're wonderful productions and that's always well and good, but the best stuff, the most interesting stuff, the big hit stuff, is always the new Canadian material, and that has really, really affected people's attitudes here. There's absolutely no stigma attached to new work or Canadian work. I think there still is some stigma attached to new work in other places. Some of the theatres here that have devoted themselves almost exclusively to new and/or Canadian work have also helped to break down those kinds of barriers. I don't think that atmosphere exists in Vancouver. I'm not suggesting that people there go: "Oooo. Rather see a Neil Simon than a Beverley Simons," but I think there's probably more resistance to it than there is here. I think it's something that's unique to Edmonton. Different in Edmonton than in say Halifax.

Johnson: *Is there an audience in Edmonton that doesn't go to the theatre that you would like to reach?*

Massing: An audience that doesn't go to the theatre - hmmm.

Johnson: *Or do we have a pretty broad cross-section?*

Massing: Well, I don't think we do. It's extremely elite. It's even down to people being from a particular area of the city. I think most of the city's theatre audience is drawn

from an area extending from the University south to about 30th Avenue. And I'm not really kidding when I say that. The demographics show that. Those are the people who go to the Folk Festival and the Fringe and the Citadel's Rice Theatre. And obviously different theatres have different characters of audiences. The Phoenix subscription audience has a very different character than the people who go to the Shoctor. There are certain distinctive qualities to different audiences, but theatre basically attracts white, middle to upper class, university educated. All those things. I think that holds true for almost any theatre in the city. So obviously we're not winching many non-traditional audiences, and I don't know if there's any answer to that. I would like to think there was.

Just to tag on that: I'm not happy about the fact that theatre audiences are elite. I would like very much for things to open up in a Fringe sort of way. Riding over to the Fringe in a cab and having the cab driver say, "Oh, have you seen- ?" Not to be stereotypical, but someone who doesn't go to any other theatre, and they're in there slugging and enjoying themselves. Anyway. It's very, very frustrating to me. Yes, this is a good theatre community to live in, but that is the thing that is most appealing to me about television and film: you reach some kind of an audience. It's pathetic how small a percentage of people go to theatre. So that's a source of great frustration.

Johnson: *When I interviewed Beverley Simons, she said that she had decided against moving to a larger urban centre like New York because she would have been under the nose of power. She felt that staying in Vancouver gave her the freedom to write what she wanted to write. Would you respond in similar fashion?*

Massing: Yeah. I have to admit that if I, for some reason, was transplanted to New York right now and had to write there and try to make that my home as a writer, that I would suddenly become very, very conscious of: "What do these people want to watch and do I have the sensibility to give it to them?" I don't really think about that much here. I would probably start to get conscious of that in Toronto, as much as I hate to admit it, because it's a very big city. It's much bigger than Edmonton and it is the centre of the universe. I'm sure it would cross my mind. So maybe that is limiting.

Johnson: *It probably doesn't have to cross your mind here. If you're very much at home in a place then it's not something you have to be conscious of.*

Massing: Yeah. It's probably a good reason for not moving to one of those cities, if you can find a way into the market without actually living there.

Johnson: *Do you have any desire to see your plays done in other centres?*

Massing: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I'm kind of lazy about pursuing it. That's one of the things I want to do this year actually: is be more active in pursuing productions in other cities. I'm not quite sure how yet, because the system is kind of cock-eyed. I don't think you really accomplish a lot by sending your play out in a brown paper bag to people, but I would really like to be produced in other places. I would love to be produced in Toronto. I would love to be produced in Halifax, just because I'd love to go to Halifax. It would be a good reason to go there. I like the Maritimes a lot. I have never been there, but it sounds like my kind of place, and I think it would be a good place for my plays. I think the brain-set is very similar.

...

Johnson: *Just a couple more questions. Do you think that your writing has a feminine voice or a female voice?*

Massing: Oh boy. I don't know. I guess there are more women than men in my plays, but I don't feel like I can't write male characters. I guess that's why I'm feeling kind of leery and vague here. I think my male characters are as clear as my female characters. But just given the fact that I don't think there are that many clearly written or interestingly written female characters in the scheme of things, I guess that makes anyone who writes interesting female characters stick out, because really, I think they do get short shrift.

Johnson: *Why?*

Massing: I think it's because men in real life and men in literature are more likely to be active and have a strong obsession or drive. That's the way men are perceived. I see this a lot in women's writing. I teach a lot of young playwrights, mostly girls. Central characters must be strongly driven and active, or they wouldn't be the central character, and young girls will almost always assign those characteristics to men. That's what they see around them. That's what they read. That's what they see on t.v.

I have to fight that urge in my own writing. I quite often find myself going: "Well, and then he'll come and he'll be a nuclear scientist or whatever." I always find myself thinking: "Well, why would it be a man?" You know? I think people make assumptions about who is more likely to be active and strong and pro-active and driving the action along, and most of the time, whether people are conscious of it or not, they make those assumptions about men and not about women. Women who are active and strong are more eccentric or weird. They stand out as "strong characters", whereas men are just "central characters".

Johnson: *In terms of women writing for the theatre - getting their plays produced - is there anything that needs to change either in the Edmonton theatre community or the Canadian theatre community to make it easier for new women writers to have their work done?*

Massing: I'm trying to wrap my brain around that one. I don't know what I'd say. Most of the things that I think need to change about being a writer have nothing to do with gender.

Johnson: *What are they?*

Massing: Better pay. Not to leap into something so banal as money, but it's all to do with more respect for the craft. Better markets. I think theatres that do Canadian theatre should be rewarded. I'm talking in terms of funding bodies now. I think writers need to be given a kind of status. I think writers need to be allowed to make a living in the theatre somehow, and that operates on a number of levels. Somehow theatres have to find a way to pay them better. There has to be new and innovative ways found so that writers can have relationships with theatres, so that they aren't adrift on some island. Writers have to have connections to a theatre that will do their work, or have some potential to do their work, because it's just so lonely otherwise. No wonder people give up so easy. It's so easy to give up because there's so little encouragement.

It would be nice if there was a better way to have an exchange between regions or plays and writers, but in times of shrinking budgets I think people tend to pull the cloak of their own little community around them. People in Edmonton aren't as likely to do a play from Vancouver when they've got their own little community of writers. But, none of these things really have anything to do with gender. People need to learn how to sell things better and there needs to be a better system at the theatres for examining or reading or dealing with work that's coming to them from writers. You can send a play

out to a theatre and not even have it acknowledged a year and a half later. It's like no one has ever received it. How do you market plays in a country like this? I don't know. It all goes by word of mouth. It's so incredibly ridiculous. Everything's done on hearsay. It's not really run like a business.

We need to find a way for people to make a living and be somewhat fulfilled knowing that they can pay their rent. I mean that's a big deal. It has to be a big deal. We've been socialized to believe that it's a big deal to support yourself with what you do for a living, and if you can't, then you can't help but question your own legitimacy. It would be nice if people could make a living doing this.

Johnson: *Maybe then people would stop asking questions like: "Why do you write?"*

Massing: Ha. Not to make money.

PEGGY THOMPSON studied film and drama at the University of British Columbia. In the late seventies, she helped to form Hot Flashes Theatre which toured new plays by Vancouver writers. In the early 1980's she acted as the "scenarist" with Peter Eliot Weiss on several live soap operas which played to packed houses: *West End, Pendrell at Bute* and *A B.C. Romance*. In the mid-eighties, Thompson began to write her own scripts, but still from an improvisational and collaborative base. She wrote several plays that she describes as "comedies dealing with feminism". Of *Brides in Space*, which received mixed critical response, she says, "I really wanted to see if you could do an improv-based comedy that had political content. What I learned from *Brides* is that you can't." Since 1987, Thompson has worked exclusively in film as a screenwriter and producer. Her film *In Search of the Last Good Man* was a 1990 Genie Award Winner. Thompson lives in Vancouver.

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Cocaine, the Board Game. Unpublished play, 1987.

Interview with **PEGGY THOMPSON**, Thursday, May 24, 1990

I talked to Peggy Thompson in her Vancouver apartment on a rainy late afternoon. She had located herself at the urban centre, just blocks from overpriced coffee shops, French clothing stores, a lot of traffic, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Her reno-chic apartment was much calmer and less cluttered than the surrounding city. We sat and talked over herbal tea at her kitchen table. She told me about the difficulties of writing feminist comedy, and the difficulties of writing in British Columbia. Our conversation mixed with the strangely indistinguishable sounds of construction and rainfall outside.

Lise Ann Johnson: *How did you begin writing for the theatre?*

Peggy Thompson: I studied at the University of British Columbia. I studied film and theatre.... I did everything. I took acting courses, stage managing, set building, costume designing.... I didn't finish my degree but left in my third year. At that time the OFY programme and the LIP programme, two federal programmes to assist young people to do creative-based community programmes, were in effect[1]. I applied for a number of grants and put together a group of eight people: six women and two men. We formed a theatre company called Hot Flashes Theatre. We did new plays by Vancouver playwrights and toured the province. We didn't know anything. We sort of inflicted ourselves on these poor communities, but it was a tremendous learning experience.... Almost all of the people associated with that group are still working today.

Johnson: *So you started writing for that group?*

Thompson: Yes. I did extensive rewrites on a couple of the plays. That's when I realized that writing came very naturally to me.... My background is really comedy. Comedy is what I do, and that's a bit of an anomaly in Canada and in theatre.

...

Johnson: *What was your next writing experience?*

Thompson: Peter and Kate Weiss started doing, with Morris Panych and Ken MacDonald and Bob White, a show called *West End*. *West End* is my favourite theatre experience. Bob moved to the Prairies, so they said, "Peg why don't you come and co-write the scenarios with Peter and do the lights?" The lights were actually very critical. It was the person who was sitting in the lighting booth who would end the scene, whenever you felt that they were getting out of control or boring or dull....

The show was set in a fictitious apartment building in the West End. Each episode was an hour long and it took place Saturday at midnight. Each week we would comment on not only the characters' continuing lives and continuing problems, but any issue that was current in town....

That's where I first began to understand theatrical process because *West End* was all process.... Peter and I would sit in the back room and at some point during the evening each actor would come in and we would say, "Okay, what do you want to have happen to your character this week?" And they would tell us, and then depending on

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[1]The Opportunity for Youth (OFY) and the Local Initiatives Projects (LIP) were two job-creation programmes put in place by the Trudeau government in the 1970's.

whether or not we liked the idea, we would use it. Then, Peter and I would get together on Saturday afternoon before the show and we would write fourteen scenes in which usually ten were used....

At least once during each show Kate would stop the action and ask the audience a question: "What is it that you want to have happen now? Should X go off with Y? Should they burn the building down?" We had all felt the irritation of the fourth wall in our work. The fact that audiences all sit like this [Thompson slumps in her seat], and it's not far from that to this [Thompson mimes sleeping in her seat]. We wanted people to sit like this [Thompson leans forward], and feel that it was their show. Peter and Kate had done a lot of work with Theatresports. Theatresports doesn't have a lot of content, but it really has a passionate audience. Why doesn't other theatre have a passionate audience? We wanted to do theatre with a narrative, that was a little more sophisticated than Theatresports, but where the audience feels that connection. With *West End* we achieved that. Admission was $2.99 and we would sell out every weekend. We would have three hundred people in the theatre. It was phenomenal.

Johnson: *And was that potential for participating in the play well received?*

Thompson: Oh yeah. People would be screaming. It was just a phenomenal success. Of course the irony of it was that the group would split the receipts from the door, and people made about six or seven dollars each week off the show....

Johnson: *Did that group have an influence on the rest of your career?*

Thompson: Kate Weiss, who directed all these shows, has been a huge influence on my life. She and Peter and I have worked together now for almost 15 years, off and on, on different projects....

Johnson: *What happened after* West End*?*

Thompson: The core group from *West End* went on and did a few more shows[1]. *Escape from B.C. Place* was the last show we did. It was the last big moment that we had. Our group had been together for three years, and never made any money off of the shows. I think we all did what was to be our best work for some time.

Johnson: *How were those projects important for you in terms of writing?*

Thompson: I didn't learn anything about writing. I don't think I learned anything about writing until these last three years of my career.... You never learn anything from your successful projects because you don't know what you're doing right. You learn from your disasters. You learn a lot from your disasters if you can bear to look into the abyss.

But what I did learn from those projects was how to work with actors. I learned a lot about working with actors. The next thing I did, I teamed up with Peg Campbell and we did our 1986 film called *It's a Party*. Cineworks, which is the film co-op here, got some money from somewhere, probably the Canada Council, to do three training films to train Cineworks members. Peg was a member, so she said, "The film board donated the raw stock and the equipment, but we have to film it in one day and we can't pay anybody." But because I had just come from all these huge shows where nobody got paid, I had a phenomenal acting pool to draw from....

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[1]The shows included *Pendrell at Bute, A B.C. Romance* and *Escape from B.C. Place.*

Completely without realizing it, I used everything that I had learned from Kate. So the process on *It's a Party* was theatre process combined with film conceptualism. This film was an enormous success for us. Ironically Cineworks owned the copyright on it so again, we never made any money on it.... The film just went around the world playing film festivals, and it was bought by the Arts and Entertainment Network from New York. It was just a wonderful experience for us. We got to travel sometimes with it.

After that, Peg and I started working on the feature screenplay that I'm in the process of just finishing. During that time I also had just a flurry of theatrical activity, far too much. I did about seven shows in three years. It just about killed me.

Johnson: *Can you tell me about some of that theatrical activity?*

Thompson: *Brides* originally started as an improv project which developed over two years. At that point, I really wanted to see if you could do an improv based comedy that had political content. What I learned from *Brides* is that you can't. Such is life....

I went on to do a whole series of collectives. [*The Last Will and Testament of*] *Lolita* was an amazing experience and quite a wonderful show. You look at those shows and you can see the problems in them, but you also know from the incredibly passionate response from those in the audience that loved the show, that there's something kind of amazing there. After *Brides*, people stopped me on the street whom I'd never seen before and told me they liked the play. I don't know how they knew who I was. They were just that keen. And the same with *Lolita*, people would stop me in Toronto.

Both plays are comedies dealing with feminism. Again, that was something that people just didn't know how to take. The people who liked it were mostly women. Feminists with a sense of humour was the audience for those shows. We made the mistake both times of thinking that they might have a broader appeal.

Johnson: *And you don't think they can?*

Thompson: No.

Johnson: *Why?*

Thompson: Well, not those ones. I think one can....

Johnson: *So what does it take?*

Thompson: I think it takes craft. At that point, I think I was hiding in the collective, which is something that's very nice to do. You don't really have to assume full responsibility for anything. It's like: "Okay, I can do a lot of these because they're done very quickly." That's also a good thing about them. You learn a tremendous amount, but at the same time, you're not on the line in the same way that you are with a piece that is yours....

I haven't worked in the theatre since *Cocaine*. I decided that instead of working very quickly, I would work very slowly. Since then, I really have only done two projects: *In Search of the Last Good Man* and this screenplay. And that's what I've been doing for the last two and a half years.

...

Johnson: *Is it more difficult for women working in the theatre?*

Thompson: It's difficult for everyone. It's more difficult for women than it is for white men. It's more difficult for men of colour than it is for women. There's a little chain of who it's more difficult for. It's difficult for everyone. I don't think anyone working in the theatre has an easy time of it. There's no money and the hours are really awful. It's a gruelling, gruelling life and it's a dying art form, so to give your life over to theatre requires an incredible amount of courage. That's why fewer and fewer people now feel the call to go to theatre. They go to television or rock videos or film. Ironically, I think that because of it, theatre is getting better and better. But it's not getting any easier.

Johnson: *Is there an audience out there that isn't going to the theatre? You mentioned that your audiences for* West End *were not people that normally went to the theatre.*

Thompson: No they weren't, and that was kind of the reason that we did that. This is a big problem for me. It's even a problem in film. I look at the movie page and I don't want to go to any of those movies. I go into the [Vancouver] Playhouse and I feel very uncomfortable sitting with those people. These aren't my people, this isn't my stage. I don't belong in this room. So we knew there was an audience out there who wasn't going to the theatre. We wanted to pull in our audience, and it worked. We were able to do that by breaking all the rules and by not being attached to any structure.

The horror of not being attached to any structure is that there is no money. That's the joy and blessing of it. You have complete control. To me that is incredibly important now.... All the projects I've done that have been successful, I've had, if not complete control, a huge amount of control.

Johnson: *Does film give you more control?*

Thompson: Yes, because I produce. If I was simply a screenwriter, I would have less control. In theatre, the playwright is a very respected component, possibly with more power than the director. In film, the writer is not the most important. Writers are hired and fired at random. But if you work as an independent and you produce your own work, you have complete control.

Johnson: *And why is control important in terms of being a writer?*

Thompson: It's because theatre and film both require a multiplicity of vision and skills and people to create it. If the original intent is lost, and it's very easy for that to happen, you get a different product. Sometimes it's better, but most of the time it's not.

Johnson: *You've worked both here and in Toronto with Nightwood. Is theatre different on the West Coast?*

Thompson: It's very difficult to work in theatre on the West Coast. There's less money here, there's fewer theatres, and there's less interest in the theatre here. So - take it from there! And the audiences here, which is maybe why I stay here, like different things than they do other places. They like their theatre funnier. I don't know what's different. It's the reason *Sex Tips [for Modern Girls* by Peter Eliot Weiss] was a huge phenomenal success here and a medium success in Toronto and a flop in New York. It was a big success in Buffalo and other smaller centres. Maybe it has to do with being a smaller centre. Theatre here is not as pretentious. It just isn't. It tends to lean towards the commercial, and I think to a certain extent my work does too. Or can.

Johnson: *It certainly has the humour in it, which isn't fair to characterize as commercial, but is attractive for an audience.*

Thompson: That's the British influence. The big cultural influence up until the 60's was British. We have British humour, and that's why these crazy comedies do so well here and not so well back east.

Johnson: *Would you say that what people are writing is shaped by what audiences want to see?*

Thompson: Well, I wouldn't say that. No, because I think that the writers and the audience share a common vision. Even a play like *Alone* [by Patricia Ludwick]. Although it wasn't funny, it was completely about this part of the world.

Johnson: *In what way?*

Thompson: I'm just at this late stage in my life becoming a regionalist. My new project, which is about childhood and to a certain extent about my childhood, is set on the Gulf Islands which is where my family lives. People here are very connected to nature.

Johnson: *I can see how that might be less immediate to someone who lives in Toronto.*

Thompson: Well, we still have nature. They don't have nature back east anymore. I mean, you go to Lake Ontario and think, "This is really weird."

Johnson: *It's not Stanley Park.*

Thompson: It's just different. And we shouldn't have a unified national region. Meech Lake is the worst of that. Culturally, what would be the point of it? We're like twenty little countries. Places are so different and have been shaped historically. All the best work that Canada produces is regional, with short stories leading the pack, and the Prairies being the place they come from.

Johnson: *If that's the case, then are there things that we should change in the arts community to support that? Should we have a Canada Council?*

Thompson: Well, God, we'd be dead without it. Out here we don't have any provincial funding.

Johnson: *Is the answer to increase provincial funding?*

Thompson: I guess. I mean here we are again looking for answers to these problems but there aren't any. B.C. is nothing but a land of contradictions. We have the Socreds and then we have this semi-radical centre called Vancouver.... The Socreds are a very repressive government. My bet, as someone who has lived here forever, is that we'll always have that. That's just one of the things that makes this place so special.

So, yeah, provincial arts funding would help. That's in the process of happening, but theatre in Vancouver would be dead without the Canada Council. Absolutely. Canada Council is a bureaucracy, but we're lucky to have it. They don't have anything like it in the States. It's very difficult for them. You have to be a major artist to get funding.

...

Johnson: *How has Kate Weiss been important to your theatre career?*

Thompson: Kate or Peter have been involved in almost every project I've done, from Hot Flashes through to *Cocaine*. With Green Thumb being the exception, every show I've done has been directed by Kate. I guess there were three or four people in the Vancouver theatre community that supported my work: Dennis [Foon, then artistic director of Green Thumb] being one of them. You have to have those people there because you'd just lose your mind if you didn't. Kate was my most staunch supporter. She was the person that I worked with the most, but Pamela Hawthorne at the New Play Centre, although my work baffled her, produced it. She's now at Telefilm too. This is the other thing that has happened in Vancouver. Everyone is now working in film. The actors are working in film and the writers are trying to work in American television.

Johnson: *For financial reasons?*

Thompson: Yeah, that's all it is.

Johnson: *And has that helped or hindered the theatre community?*

Thompson: Three years ago Vancouver theatre was at its lowest ebb ever. Theatre has never been important here, the way it's been important in Toronto and in Montreal. People there need theatre. The cities are unpleasant and art provides that inspiration or nourishment or whatever. Here we just look at mountains, and a play cannot compete with that. That's why Peter always said, "We have to do something different here." Because you can't compete with this beauty. It would be silly to try.

Johnson: *So it has to fill some other need?*

Thompson: It's got to involve people in a different way and empower them in a different way, which is certainly what he and Kate took to its furthest possible extension in *The Haunted House Hamlet* [adapted by Peter Eliot Weiss].

Johnson: *Which was environmental?*

Thompson: Right. It was a wonderful show and phenomenally successful for them. It was an international success.

Johnson: *So what works here?*

Thompson: Morris's [Panych] play *7 Stories* did very well here and it was very much like *West End*: seven stories about seven people in seven different levels of an apartment building. The set had seven stories. It was something different right away. It looked very different.

...

Johnson: *Was it important that your biggest supporter, Kate Weiss, was a woman?*

Thompson: Oh yes. No one else would have done *Pendrell at Bute*. No one else would have done *Brides*, although Nightwood was a big supporter of that show too. It had a staged reading in Toronto and a workshop at Factory Lab that Banuta [Rubess] arranged for me. But no one else would have even understood it. We just sort of blithely went on with it.

Johnson: *What about the New Play Centre?*

Thompson: The New Play Centre has been very helpful. They produced *Bad Brains* and an early play of mine called *Street.* That was very helpful. You learn a lot from doing those first early short pieces. They're extremely helpful, although I think it was because Kate was an associate director there that those plays were done. She was a big champion of my work. But so was Pamela Hawthorne, although the New Play Centre aesthetic has always been and probably will always be much more conservative than its equivalents back east. In Montreal they have Playwrights Workshop, which is not a conservative organization. The Play Centre is.

Johnson: *Do you think any changes need to be made to help women writing for the theatre?*

Thompson: For the most part, and this is a sweeping generalization, women artistic directors will do more plays by women. There are always exceptions. The really well-crafted plays, like Joan MacLeod's work will just break through. It has a really universal appeal and everyone wants to do them. That's great. But even someone like Sally Clark, she has that connection with Jackie Maxwell. It is a sweeping generalization, but for the most part it's women artistic directors who will have 60, 70, 80, 100% of their season by women writers.

...

Johnson: *Is it difficult to get rid of preconceptions of what makes good and bad theatre?*

Thompson: ....There is no good or bad, but that's the hardest thing to learn. You have to let go of the judge, and when you do that, you enter very perilous territory. When you throw away what you know, you will make mistakes, but you will also find new places. And when that works, you get this phenomenal *West End* response to the work. People go, "Well however did you think of that?" And when it fails, you get the other kind of response: they pull away from it.

Johnson: *Does it also mean finding the audience it will work for?*

Thompson: That's right. And *West End* really was Sodom North. That was a bringing together of different people's audiences. There was Morris' audience, there was John Moffat's audience, there was my audience, there was Kate's audience, there was Peter's audience, there was the band's audience, there was Jill Dawn's audience. For once, it was a pulling together of disparate groups.... The audience was very diverse, although it was mostly gay men and a lot of single women.

Johnson: *Maybe that mixing up of groups, also mixes up the yardstick of what is deemed "good" theatre and "bad" theatre.*

Thompson: Well, nobody would have called *West End* "good" theatre. It was something else. It was outrageous, it was flamboyant, it was offensive, it was vulgar, and it was boring on the nights it didn't work. But it was never "good".

...

Johnson: *What kind of response did you get with* Brides in Space*?*

Thompson: It was mixed. Critical response was mixed and audience response was mixed.

Johnson: *Who did it appeal to?*

Thompson: ....Women who saw the play and liked it, loved it. It wasn't like everyone went "Oh this is awful." Students at the art school who saw it loved it. It had a very small audience. The response to the public readings that it had both in Toronto and in Vancouver led us to believe that it had the potential to reach a wider audience, but we were mistaken....

Johnson: *Can you tell me about the* Lolita *experience that you had in Toronto.*

Thompson: Oh, I'll tell you something about *Brides* and it's true about *Lolita* too. The comment that I get about my work, time and time again, is that the men are more interesting than the women, because I'm not afraid to write horrible men. And of course that's what audiences enjoy. They like the horrible characters. So, I am working on a horrible mother character now. She's wonderful. Conventional treatment of women is very successful with audiences because that's the cultural norm and they don't question it. So when you try to do something different, the inclination is to write a new kind of female character. But by removing the villainy or the humaness of them, they become very uninteresting.

Johnson: *So how do you write a female character that doesn't necessarily fit the cultural norm but is still not-*

Thompson: Very thin? It's difficult. We're doing it, I think, in *The Big Flirt*, which is about a woman whose pride leads to a fall. And that, of course, makes her very sympathetic.

...

Johnson: *You worked on the* Lolita *project in Toronto. How would that project have worked here?*

Thompson: I think audiences would have hated it.

Johnson: *Why?*

Thompson: Despite the almost slapstick comedy that it had, it was extremely cerebral. I don't know if you know Banuta [Rubess]. Her approach is extremely intellectual. She has a doctorate from Oxford. People who liked *Lolita* said it was like watching a dream unfold. They had to give up trying to follow the story or make sense of it. They had to lose themselves in the images. It had that kind of effect on them. It was very challenging. What we set out to do was an imagistic comedy. Now why anybody in their right mind would set out to do such a thing is another question. It's certainly something that nobody has done before. And a feminist imagistic comedy too. It's kind of like "three strikes and you're out". I think in many ways it was probably quite a wonderful show to watch, but no, I don't think it would have done well here.

Johnson: *Was it asking too much?*

Thompson: It wouldn't say much to people here. Again, you would have a small following. When Jennifer [Martin] did her play about Marilyn Monroe at the Fringe festi-

val, it was performed at a small venue and it was packed - about sixty people - and they loved it. But again, if you took that show, I suspect, and put it on a mainstage in a 350 seat house, it wouldn't work in the same way....

Johnson: *Do you think which space you need changes depending on where you are and which audience you have? Could you have a mainstage show in Toronto, bring it to Vancouver, put it in the same space with a different audience and have it fail?*

Thompson: *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet* [by Ann-Marie MacDonald] is a perfect example of that. It had a bitter, brutal, unpleasant stay here, as I knew in my heart of hearts that they would. I loved the show. I thought it was just a scream. I laughed and laughed and laughed. But audiences here - you couldn't get them there.

Johnson: *Where was it?*

Thompson: It was in a nice enough space, it was in the Cultural Centre, which is about as alternative as you can get here and still be in a theatre. It's an old church. It just didn't speak to audiences here.

Johnson: *Why?*

Thompson: It was very intelligent. Maybe feminist comedy- I don't know how much of an audience there is for it.

Johnson: *Here or in general?*

Thompson: I'm speaking in general.

Johnson: *Because it certainly worked in Toronto and I know when it came to Edmonton, I think it sold quite well.*

Thompson: It didn't do well in Ottawa. But you see, Edmonton is a big theatre town, whereas Vancouver is not. I saw it on the last night and the audience really liked it, but they just couldn't sell it and that's a big problem here. You just can't sell shows because people just won't go. You just don't know what's going to go and what isn't.

Johnson: *So what can women do here? What is it that's going to sell?*

Thompson: Who knows? Who knows. A variety of women have come out of here and worked here and all have done very well: Sharon Pollock, Margaret Hollingsworth. Women can do anything here, but Vancouver is a hard town to sell theatre in, in general. So the riskier your work, the harder the sell is going to be.

BEVERLEY SIMONS was born in Flin Flon, Manitoba in 1938. Her family moved to Edmonton in the early 1950's, where Simons pursued an interest in music and creative writing. In 1956 she entered McGill University where she majored in English and started an experimental theatre company that produced some of her early work. In 1958, she moved to Vancouver with her husband and completed her undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia. Her first son was born three years later, prompting her to focus on a writing career over an acting career. The 1960's and early 1970's were profitable years for Simons. *Crabdance*, perhaps her best known work, premiered in Seattle in 1969, and made its Canadian debut in 1972 at Vancouver's Playhouse Theatre Centre. In the early seventies, the Canada Council funded both a research trip to study theatre in the Far East and a Senior Arts Award for work on *Leela Means to Play*. During the mid-seventies, she met with frustration over unproduced film scripts, and in 1978 she finally abandoned writing for the theatre after a disappointing workshop of *Leela Means to Play* at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. Following a decade and a half hiatus from the theatre, Simons is currently working on a new play. She resides in Vancouver.

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Interview with **BEVERLEY SIMONS**, Wednesday, May 23, 1990

I interviewed Beverley Simons at the Bread Basket Café on a mildly sunny and surprisingly unrainy afternoon in Vancouver. The surroundings were far from intimate and more closely resembled a university lunchroom than a café: loud, bright and extremely clean. The décor was suggestive of fast-food restaurants, and the mostly vegetarian food had to be ordered at the counter. Protected by the raucous background of clinking glasses, collegiate flirting, and neo-sixties music, we talked for almost three hours about Simons' decision to stop (and start) writing for the theatre.

I began the conversation by explaining the focus of the project: to interview women from or living in Western Canada who were writing for the theatre. Simons responded by explaining her initial hesitancy to participate.

Beverley Simons: When I'm working, I don't experience myself in any deep sense as a woman or as a Canadian. That isn't to say that I am unaware of these issues. I am painfully aware on all levels, both personally and professionally, what it means to be a powerful, active writer who happens to be female, and a Canadian female at that. There are definite consequences, but as an artist, these aren't primary for me, except that my life experience is based on what I've lived. It does feed into my awareness as a human being, but essentially that's what I am first: I'm a human being first. My sensibility, the topics that I want to deal with, and the people who I want to speak to are in that larger scope.... The writers I value gave me a vision of their time, a vision of humanity.... I would like to feel that I am doing the same. I feel that's my function. That makes me a certain kind of writer, which is not necessarily the kind of writer that is appreciated in my time and context. Or even the country in which I live.

Lise Ann Johnson: *....So as a writer, is your objective to speak to people in your time?*

Simons: Yes, people in my time and any who may come and return to my work. I believe that you must speak as fully as you can in your period. We are all born. We all have impulses to power, to sex, to human relationships. We all experience marriage, whether it's official or not, agony, death. So we can continue to speak to each other and share what we know as true, or expose the hypocrisy which we may unfortunately discover. And that's been much of what I've written about: multiple lies....

Johnson: *Do your plays follow the story of character or plot?*

Simons: Character, and what it exposes that is timeless to me: the timeless games, power plays, attempts at understanding, the recurring cruelty. The hidden element of what happens between human beings. I've always been - not obsessed, obsessed is too strong - well, almost obsessed by layers of reality. Two people sitting and talking as we are is only one way of showing what's happening. Reality is multiple and is being constructed by each of us and everybody else in this room. If we saw all of the realities and all the kinds of communication going on, we would see a cosmos.... That's what fascinates me: how to be able to show what I've seen. I knew I had to and wanted to speak within character, because that's how it usually comes to me. I'll see or hear a character. I'm haunted by a character, or I'll begin a work and think I know what it's about, and another character keeps coming up. I can't get rid of this person until I begin to realize where the work is actually going and I eventually understand why he or she is there.

Johnson: *Before becoming a writer, you also had an interest in music and in acting?*

Simons: ....After I graduated from McGill, I wanted to be both an actress and a writer. When I had children, I had to choose. I decided it would be writing.

Johnson: *Why did you choose writing?*

Simons: Well, the answer is actually quite easy. It's the reason I don't regret leaving music.... Because I can shape the reality. That's really what I want to do. I want to present what I see. I want to pass on my vision.

Johnson: *Writing gives you the power to shape?*

Simons: You can cover it all. I can play all the parts. And I do. When I write, I play all the parts.

Johnson: *It doesn't sound like you've actually left acting or music. All of that feeds into the work.*

Simons: Absolutely. I'm glad you said that. Music is essential to understanding my work.... I work very, very slowly. At the polishing stage it's very, very slow and delicate work. I choose every word and every phrase to be right for that context. I work within a musical framework. But it also has to be visual....

Johnson: *Can you do that writing fiction?*

Simons: Yes.

Johnson: *Is that why you're not able to write for the theatre?*

Simons: Well I have news for you. I'm back to writing plays now as well.

Johnson: *Why did you stop?*

Simons: Part of it came out of my profound disappointment with the lack of response to *Leela Means to Play*, which I consider my major work.... I gave a great deal in that piece, and for me, it's a major statement, both in the substance of what it's dealing with, as well as in the scoring. The form was one that I had hoped to reach since I began to move into theatre. I was so thrilled that I had got there I just thought everybody else would be as thrilled and would understand it as clearly as I did. Actually, my concern when I finished it, was that it was too commercial, which is very funny, because the response to it has not been that at all....

Johnson: *Do you feel that your career would have been different if you hadn't stayed in Vancouver?*

Simons: Audrey Wood [an American agent] wanted me to move to New York, but I wanted to stay in Canada. I wanted to stay on the West Coast where I felt comfortable. Well, more than that, I love it. And I've taken the consequences. Later, when I spoke to people in CBC television, they wanted me to move to Toronto. I've suffered the consequences. I stayed here. Live in New York and you're under the nose of people with power. Live in Toronto and it's the power centre of Canada.... Theatre is a business.

I've never been able to think of it that way. But I've been made to remember that because of what I've suffered....

Johnson: *Would there not have been consequences involved in moving to New York or Toronto?*

Simons: You're quite right. And I made that choice. I had hoped that I could live here. I hoped that my work would spread from here outward. It simply didn't happen that way, but you live and learn. I wrote to Audrey Wood and told her just that. I said that I would feel New York breaking down the walls of where I lived. I wasn't interested in being in that environment because my voice would become like several of the people she already handled.

Johnson: *You're influenced by who produces your work?*

Simons: That's right, and I wanted to draw on my life experience as I had known it in Canada. And I felt it was actually beginning. It was tremendously exciting on the West Coast at that time. I was convinced that we were going to move into a major dramatic period.... I really did. We had all of the beginning elements here. I was very close friends for a period with George Ryga. Hershel Hardin had written some plays. John Juliani was doing Savage God.... It was a tremendously exciting time here. Peter Hay was living in Vancouver - he's now gone to Los Angeles - and he really was the beginning of Talonbooks. He published *Crabdance*. He and Dorothea did the whole thing. They set it up in type, they established a place to get it run off, they did the whole works. And when *Crabdance* was done in Seattle, John Juliani and Donna were standing outside the theatre and in the lobby selling copies. That's the way it was. We were all very good friends and mutually supportive. When you're talking about the creative environment, there it was.

Johnson: *....Do you feel that staying on the West Coast has allowed you more power over your voice as a writer?*

Simons: Oh yes. Don't get me wrong, I'm not moaning. I'm going to come through whatever I've experienced. I believe I would have produced more, I would have written more as a playwright, if what began then had continued to flourish. After that I began to meet disappointment after disappointment. We hit the downturn. I can't remember just when - several things happened in the 70's - maybe it was when the funding turned off. It became difficult. *Leela* came out in '76 and it was already not the time....

Johnson: *What else contributed to your decision to cease writing for the theatre?*

Simons: ....One of my terrible disappointments was that Peter Hay did not understand *Leela Means to Play*. John Juliani didn't leap to attention and say, "Oh my God I've got to do this play right away." He thought maybe he'd like to work it through with his students. But I didn't have time to give to students working it through. I knew what I had. I don't need to go and do a testing out to see I've really got something.

Johnson: *I take it you don't find workshopping helpful?*

Simons: Some people enjoy that process. George Ryga loved it. He said that he didn't worry about how it was going to look. He didn't write the stage directions. He poured out the dialogue. It was in the [workshop] process that the selection happened. That's not the way I function. I see the thing in total. It doesn't mean to say that I'm

rigid, but I can't help it that my vision is a complete vision. I can't deny that, or I would be bored to do my writing.

...

Johnson: *Do you think things would have been different for you elsewhere?*

Simons: My timing is wrong. I was too early, and also in the wrong place. I'm in a country that is only now, maybe, becoming ready, maybe, to hear somebody like me. I'm also not a sweet writer. In a strange way I'm tender, but I'm not sweet. I'm not a nice person writer. I write with an unrelenting vision and a passionate vision. These are not welcome usually in this country.

...

Johnson: *What happened for you after* Crabdance*?*

Simons: That brief period where I felt things were beginning to move for me was over quickly. In that interim I had been working on several films with the National Film Board - features which never evolved.... I did a part one and a part two to one of the films, and seriously considered pulling it together and doing it myself. But I realized that if I did that, I would turn into the hero of my double film. He began as a man, utterly ruthless, shaping the world to satisfy himself. He wanted to make it into a perfect composition.... The film looks at his destruction. He refuses to see the destruction in his own personal life.... I almost stopped my personal life to go across the country at that time and do fundraising. But at the end of this film, the man comes through as a human being beginning to see the world in a whole way: what each choice means to him and those around him. I would have gone backwards. I would have become my monster. Why? Because I had three young children. I did not have the means to have somebody looking after them. I made a whole, human artistic choice. I didn't say I was going to end my life as a writer, but I had to say I would just let it go and let it be there in manuscript form and get on with my life. And the result is that I have three wonderful human beings. My sons. Wonderful human beings. I can't say that they're my masterpieces because I didn't make them. They are themselves, but I am just tremendously proud of them. They are some of my dearest friends. My friends, my wise critics. They are beloved. As well, I still have those manuscripts and they're good. They hold. I don't know if I'll ever see them done. I hope I'll be able to at least publish them. Eventually maybe they will be done.

So that is another chunk of my life that most people don't know about because they've not surfaced.... The National Film Board could have been part of an evolution for me, but they were under the gun for money and so that fell through. And when I finished with that, all the money disappeared in theatre. Although it was very exciting at the time, it turned out to be an unfortunate choice. In the meantime, I was writing *Leela* . *Leela* came out in '76. I've already explained the responses [to it]. I did not find someone in this country.... I was so staggered that the play hadn't been picked up. I gave myself problems to begin with because I set it up as a mainstage production. I was fed up with the Canadian game.... Given that theatres don't have very much money, they will put [Canadian plays] in their second or their third stage, and they don't put a lot of backing behind it. Canadian plays come out looking kind of amateurish because they have no money.

Johnson: *It's not just the money, it's also the space they put it in.*

Simons: That's right, and then the audiences, because it looks a little worn around the edges, say, "Oh, that's another Canadian play. That's what they look like, isn't it."... I had that experience with *Crabdance*. It was a real fight to get *Crabdance* on in this country at all, and *Crabdance* has a small cast and could be done almost anywhere. So I thought, "I'm going to make it [*Leela*] so that it isn't such an easy thing to shove it away somewhere."... People were upset because some of it, as you know, is on screen, which seemed terribly scary. I knew when I wrote it that it was a risk. A risk for budget. Also, technically, it was more frightening then. Now we have computer control which is going to make it easy stuff. When I did this they said, "My God, do you realize how hard this is? What have you done?".... I felt that I had to, or else I would be denying, what to me is the essence of theatre: to reflect in form and to express with the form, the essence of the piece. That whole play is about projection. It's one of the major themes of it. I had to use the projections, didn't I? I had to. I would have been taking away something in my theatrical artillery. Shakespeare would have been delighted, he used everything he could. One of the other things I felt about *Leela* was that I was giving back spectacle to our audience. I felt our audience was hungry for it, and they were going to the movie theatres. I wanted to get them away from the bloody movie theatres and back into the theatres.

...

Johnson: *Where would you like to see Leela done?*[1]

Simons: Larry Lillo once said to me, "This play is written for mainstage Stratford." And I said, "How did you know?" And he said, "Well that's where it should be done. The other person who could maybe handle it is John Neville." But that's another story that I won't go into. It almost happened with John Neville at The Citadel. It should have. But that's an unfortunate "almost". But Larry said, "It's a crime that this play is not being done." I had actually written to Larry when he was at The Grand and said, "Well how about *Leela* now? Why don't you give it a shot?" He didn't feel that was the place.

Johnson: *Not really.*

Simons: And I think he was right. He said, and he's repeated this to me since, that he feels the place has got to be Toronto. At the moment anyway. It's the only place that has enough population to have enough sophisticated audience, willing audience to do it.

...

Johnson: *What happened after Leela?*

Simons: I had no plans of getting back into the theatre. I had too much pain. Just too much pain. I stopped going to the theatre because it hurt me too much. For years I just couldn't bear to look at it. The theatre means a great deal to me. I believe that theatre has been a primal expression for human beings. I see it as a vital and sacred form. I don't approach it lightly, and I was too - I was just too hurt. I just could not work with it, at least at that time.

...

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[1]This section of the interview is taken from later on in the conversation. I have placed it here because it relates more closely to the preceding and following questions.

Johnson: *What prompted you to begin writing for the theatre again?*

Simons: A year ago in November, I learned that my ex-husband, from whom I'd been divorced about three years, had a child who was six or seven years old.

Johnson: *What a shock.*

Simons: It was. I had a baby die. A daughter. I had three sons. I had a daughter die at three and a half months from cradle death. And that was so terrible I couldn't talk about it. Now I can at least discuss it. So when I found out that my ex-husband had a daughter that he had not told me about - The horror of him denying the existence of a child for all those years just knocked me out. I learned years and years of another world that even went beyond this child. Just incredible. I was laughing and crying for about two weeks. Literally rolling on the floor crying and then laughing.... It would change all the time. In that process, I began to hear sections of speeches. I was in such agony, but I grabbed a kleenex box or whatever was near and started to write. Eventually it got to be pieces of paper, and then I thought, "uh oh, this is a play." I've never done anything quite like this before. It's not going to be autobiographical because that would bore me to death, but some of it you will recognize. There is going to be the existence of this child.

...

Johnson: *Is there anything else in store for you?*

Simons: I've been in and out of this damn court process. It has been hell: a profitable, personal hell in that I am learning so much about myself and what I can actually do and deal with. It's been, in a way, quite wonderful. I wouldn't mind a bit of boring routine now, though. I don't need any more testing ground, I think I've had enough. I'd like to have some time to write. Part of the irony that I'm going through is that my ex-husband is saying, "Well, this person thinks she's a writer. What has she done? Why hasn't she finished anything?" And I have to say, "Well I haven't finished anything because I've been going through hell." But you see, I keep writing about double binds and reality and appearances, and part of it was my marriage. My marriage always looked great, and sometimes it was great, but essentially I made that family function. I'm glad. For my kids, it functioned very well, and eventually they realized and we've moved through it all, but ironies are familiar territory to me. I had a difficult family background myself, and I wanted my own family to function almost at all costs. That was a mistake. So, I'm learning all of this, and it's releasing a lot of material.

When I get into the writing of it, I'm going to weave in the hypocrisy of legal attitudes. As I started to work on the piece, I found that some element was missing, and one day it just came and I got so excited. My work has to resonate for me, so that it can resonate for an audience in the larger sense. I remembered a case that my husband was involved in a number of years ago. I drew on that and I'll shape it as I choose. It was an East Indian case in which a man and his son savagely killed his niece and her husband because she had disobeyed the rules of what was considered obedience and hierarchy. From our perspective, and from most human beings' perspective, it was brutal. But from his perspective, he did what was right. That has become a reference point in the play that is very important to me. The play is now about different perspectives of realities. Who's right? I'm showing how men and our society look at women and say, "Oh well they're impractical and they don't know anything about the real world." And women look at men and say, "They're insensitive and they're impractical and they don't know anything about the real world." So that's really interested me.

I'm interested in brutalizing. I'm interested in cruelty. Everywhere. We all tend to say "they", instead of saying "me". Where does it begin? With me? Coming back to the beginning of our discussion, a story has to resonate for me on a full human scale. It has to hold a multiplicity of human reality before I'm interested in dealing with it.

...

Johnson: *Do you have any plans for the play?*

Simons: I read it to my group. I always read to people I love, just a few people I love. I'll be talking to Larry [Lillo, Artistic Director of the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre] at the end of the week. He may hate it, but this play has got to be written.

Johnson: *If he doesn't like it someone else will. There are more theatres now.*

Simons: That's true. And more theatres willing to do Canadian scripts. Before, it was a real ordeal to get them to do a Canadian play. When I began, like George [Ryga], we came out as fully developed writers at a time when our major theatres did not want to touch Canadian plays. In order to be mature writers we had to be from the States or from England. We both experienced years of humiliation because of the chance of our historic timing....

Johnson: *Any last words?*

Simons: Let me add just one thing, or even just for you to remember: I do have great compassion for women. I am experiencing and I have experienced, as a professional as well as a person in our legal system, what it means to be a woman.... So I do feel for women. But it would be false for me to speak only from the woman's perspective. And, I should add, that's why I didn't respond to you immediately. I had to wrestle with the question of a study on women playwrights in Western Canada. Do you see what it's doing, given the point from where I speak? But then I thought about it, and I thought, "That's okay."

SHARON STEARNS grew up in Vancouver. Following high school, she worked semi-professionally as an actress and then attended the National Theatre School's Acting Programme in Montreal. In the late seventies, Stearns became involved in collective creation at 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon and at Theatre Network in Edmonton. She moved from collectively creating to co-writing scripts: she wrote *A Trip to the Farm* and *Sarah and Gabrial* with Tanya Ryga and *Gin-Stained Garters* with Ruth Smillie. Her first solo play, *Hooking for Paradise*, emerged from *Gin Stained Garters*, and was produced by Workshop West in 1981. Since then, Stearns has had three plays produced: *Wagons and Dragons* with the Caravan Stage Company and *Enemy Graces*, which was commissioned by the Blyth Festival and first mounted by the Prairie Theatre Exchange, where Stearns served as writer-in-residence. Her new play *Hunter of Peace* was produced at the New Play Centre in the Fall of 1991. Stearns currently lives near Chase, B.C.

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Hooking for Paradise. PUC compuscript, 1983.

Wagons and Dragons. Unpublished play, 1983.

Enemy Graces. PUC compuscript, 1986.

Mind Your Own Body. Unpublished play, 1987.

Hunter of Peace. PUC compuscript, 1990.

The Great Going Forward. In-progress, 1991.

Interview with **SHARON STEARNS**, Tuesday, May 29, 1990

Sharon Stearns met me at a small bridge off the TransCanada in the interior of British Columbia. I followed her car down and around erratic dirt roads, and finally emerged at her home. Her built-by-hand log house sits on a hill, surrounded by thick B.C. forest, overlooking one of the Shushwap Lakes. Beyond the house and further up the hill lie rough pastures and a series of kennels housing dogs that never stop barking. Despite the property's apparent isolation, the sounds of our voices and of dogs and of wood being split mixed with the radio playing and the faint hum of traffic from the highway.

Lise Ann Johnson: *I saw Ruth Smillie [the Artistic Director of Catalyst Theatre] last week and I mentioned that I was planning to interview you. At one time the two of you worked very closely. She remarked that your lives have really gone in different directions.*

Sharon Stearns: We didn't see each other for quite a long time after I first made my connection to this area. I kind of went in a whole other direction. I sort of said goodbye to acting. I wasn't taking any jobs as an actor and wasn't seeking any jobs. In the early to mid-eighties I was living here. We were clearing the land and living in a tent. The tent site is now the garden site. I wrote my first draft of *Hooking for Paradise* in that tent on yellow foolscap paper.... I actually wrote a lot of it out in long hand and then I picked myself up a fifty-year-old Remington typewriter and sent the rest off to Gerry [Potter, Artistic Director of Workshop West Theatre]. During all of that time I didn't see Ruth very much because she was busy with her life in Saskatchewan, doing her thing with the new baby and everything. So there was about four years there where we really lost touch with each other, and it was only when she hired me to write *Mind Your Own Body*, the sexual abuse show for Catalyst in '87 that we saw each other again....

Johnson: *Does that interest you: taking commissions from a theatre on a specific issue?*

Stearns: Oh yeah. Always. Actually I've been fairly lucky. I'm just finding now that my situation is changing. The changeover from acting to writing was blessed for me because I was still working as an actress while I was writing. I had had eight years of working with directors who knew me and knew my work. So out of that came quite a number of years of support, encouragement, interest and commissions, and that kept me going while I was here. No acting at all. I'm very isolated from being here and not being in the mainstream, but I haven't been actively seeking out work. I didn't really need to because I was always sort of working on a project here and there, and then Canada Council grants have helped me through. It's only been in the last two years that I've started to have to generate my own work.

Johnson: *Why is that?*

Stearns: Nobody's been offering me commissions. Well, I have a commission going right now with Western Canada Theatre Company and an ongoing commission with Gerry for this *Great Going Forward* play, but not enough to continue to make a living.

I mean I'm barely making a living right now, whereas I had several years where it was just great, it was really wonderful. So now I'm finding out what it's like to be a writer who's having to put a little more of the hustle on and actively go out and seek financial gain for my work.

And that's been good. It's been really good for me. It's sort of jostled me awake a little bit and said, "Okay, well there's not people pounding down my doors and there's not people saying, 'Well would you write this or would you write that?'" It's developed a whole new level of discipline for me. Now I get up in the morning and if I don't work five days a week at least for three to six hours a day, I don't feel right. I have to take myself a lot more seriously than I have been taking myself in the past, when things were a lot easier for me.

Johnson: *Do you write a script and then try to find a theatre company for it? Or do you write with a specific theatre in mind?*

Stearns: I guess it's a combination. I just sent off *Hunter of Peace*, which has only had a workshop. It's never had a production. I had received some research money to do the script about four years ago. I wrote a first draft and then tabled it because several other things came up. I just got back to it this winter. I just wrote it, nobody was paying me to do it.

I wrote another draft of it, which I was quite pleased with, and sent it off to several different companies. The companies that I sent it off to are companies that I know support Canadian work. I sent it off to Linda Moore who just became Artistic Director of Neptune Theatre. She was working in Manitoba [at the Prairie Theatre Exchange] as Associate Director when I was there in '85. I think she has an interest in female playwrights. I've also seen several things that she's directed and I like her sensitivity as a director. I thought she would be interested in this script, just from what I know about her. I send my scripts to people who I think would be interested in them. It's fairly selective. I don't take thirty copies and send them out randomly to thirty different theatres. I send it out to seven or eight different places. I sent one to Conni Massing at Theatre Network. I just got a letter back from her actually. She's interested in a workshop this fall with this script.

Right now, I've got two scripts that I'm working on. One is in a third and fourth draft stage - *The Great Going Forward* with Workshop West - and the other one is brand new, I've just started it. I also have several ideas that I'm working on that nobody's paying me for and I'm not actively seeking commissions for. Because - I don't know why. I mean I've got people like Gerry Potter who has been supportive of me over the years. Kim McCaw at Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg is also really supportive of my work. Hopefully I'll approach these people at some point when the time is right to see if they'd be willing to give me a commission for a script....

Johnson: *Do you find commissions and grants too limiting if they are very specific?*

Stearns: I prefer not working within those perimeters, although there is an aspect of that that works quite well for me. My interest over the last several years has been Canadian history and celebrating characters out of Canadian history. I love the whole research aspect of it. Stick me in an archives and I'm happy for weeks. *Hunter of Peace* was based on a research grant; the first woman to explore the Rocky Mountains from Jasper to Banff by horseback in the early 1900's. That's very conducive to funding. It's very conducive to grants because I am celebrating Canadian heritage, bringing Canadian history to the public in a dramatic sense. So sometimes it works really well. I'm not like Sam Shepard or modern-day Canadian playwrights from Toronto who write very intimate modern-day psychological kitchen drama having to do with relationships

between people. I'm not that kind of a writer. A lot of my stuff has been very historically based....

Johnson: *Why are you so interested in history?*

Stearns: I don't know. I've always been accused of having a love affair with the past. History is a passion for me. Not only Canadian history, but any kind of history. I tend to romanticize it quite a bit. I think I do. I'm much more interested in the past often than I am in the future. I'm also really interested in the environment and nature and where the world is going in terms of how humans are using and abusing this planet, and so I look to the past and to this overly romantic, non-realistic, idealistic idea of what things were like when you could actually go walking through the forest and not hear any other sound except the sound of the forest. A time when you had relationships with the animals and a relationship with the land. The people who did that are, to me, fascinating. It's something that I think should be celebrated. This is just my own preference, not to say that it's right, but I'm interested in celebrating those kinds of people a lot more than I'm interested in urban heros or heroines. Wendy Lill, from back east, wrote a wonderful play, *The Fighting Days*, about the woman's suffragette movement. It's also a historical play, but it's from the urban point of view. She's a heroine and should be celebrated in Canadian history, but Mary Schaeffer from *Hunter of Peace* is a quiet heroine, I suppose. She did a wonderful, remarkable thing, not necessarily for the good of society or something like that, but in the long run, I think she was really a remarkable person....

Johnson: *You said that you are interested in writing a non-urban history. Do you live here because of that interest or did your interest emerge from living here?*

Stearns: Looking back on the last ten years, it's hard to isolate the evolution of where I am today. I was born and raised in an urban environment: a typical middle-class, suburban family setting. Ten years ago I was introduced to the Caravan Stage Company and a rural environment. Eight years ago I was introduced to here. I had no idea what I was getting into. I had no idea that I was going to become attached to it. I had no idea that if you looked at my writings to date, they were centred around people who were non-urban. They were centred around the past and a romanticism of the past. I had no idea I was going to like it out here.

In fact, it was really difficult for the first few years because I didn't know where I lived. I kept having to go away to work and come back here. I'd come back here for three months and then go away for three months. I'd help build this place and it would be mine for three months, and then I'd go away and come back and things had gone on without me. I didn't feel part of it anymore. I felt really insecure and isolated and not at home in any environment. It was really hard for about three or four years, but looking back on it now, a process was taking place of what I was writing about and what I was learning of living in a rural environment. I disattached myself from a lot of modern-day addictions. Habits, I suppose, is a better word - addictions is a little strong. It's pretty simple to live in a tent. It's pretty simple to live without electricity. Your maintenance is real low. You've got a lot of time to think about things, and you relate to things other than people. You're relating to animals, you're watching things grow. It gives you a whole other appreciation and outlook on cities. When I go to the city and see a real ersatz environment I'm always really happy to come back here.

Sometimes I step out and look at that process over the last ten years, and I see the seeds of it happening long before I was actually even living here.... The character I developed in *Sarah and Gabrial* [co-written with Tanya Ryga] was a character called Gabrial. The character Tanya developed was Sarah. It's interesting to look at those two characters now. The story is about a woman living in the early 1900's in a farm house all by herself. She's a scientist and she's pretty nutty. She has no attachment to an ur-

ban scene, and she's kind of mysterious and lonely and sad. If you look at Tanya's character, she's your typical modern woman. So that's the character I developed. Now I have a perspective on that. So, it's interesting. I see a pattern has emerged.

I'm starting to think that I'd like to write for radio. I'd like to write radio drama because I sort of sense a new pattern emerging. It's time to develop new strengths and time to take my writing even more seriously. As I get older, I'm finding: Okay this is what I do, I'd better take it real seriously. I'd better start thinking of it as a full time job.

Johnson: *So what does it take to make it work besides your own devotion? What is required from the theatre community in order for you to write on a full-time basis?*

Stearns: It wasn't true two years ago, but right now I'm finding a need for more colleagues, for more feedback, for more exchange. I've never actively sought that out. Now, for my writing to develop and for my writing to get better and for my own sense of success as a writer, I'm trying to expand and make more contact with people who do the same thing that I do. I never felt a need for that. That need has been growing over the last few years and it's because of where I live. Nobody around here does what I do. There's a lot of potters. There's a lot of artists around here but they don't write plays. When people ask me what I do around here, I don't even say playwright because it's too complicated to explain. I just say writer. If I say playwright, I lose a lot of people: "What do you mean, you do that for a living?" Well, you know, I put food on the table, I don't know if you'd call that a living. I can run a car and feed myself and that's about it.

The relationships that I have with some people I've taken for granted too much. I'm realizing how valuable they are to me. I want to do things like go to the Banff Playwriting Colony next year. I'm a great advocate of workshops for my plays. I find that they're invaluable. I know a lot of playwrights don't, but I really find them invaluable. Whenever I do go to Edmonton, or to another urban centre, I'm in there like a dirty shirt, talking to as many playwrights and going to see as many plays as I can. My family's all in Vancouver. When I go down to Vancouver now, I'm on the phone, going to talk to people at the New Play Centre. It's just very important for me to do that. I guess I feel a little like I've been in a shell for the last little while, or the last few years.

Johnson: *It must be hard, if you live isolated like this.*

Stearns: It never used to be, though. It's just now, in the last little while, that I've been finding a need for that. I've always had support from certain little sections and I've never lost that. I've never not maintained certain contact. But I want more now. I want more contact than what I have.

Johnson: *Is that partially because you've moved out of the performing aspect of theatre and into writing full time?*

Stearns: Maybe, I don't know. It's a pretty lonely job. I have great fun entertaining myself in front of my computer. It's not that it's always lonely, but I want that sounding board more than ever. Maybe because I've never had any practical writing training. I didn't ever study writing. I was an actress. That's what I studied at university and that's what I did. I want to get better at what I do. I want to get really good at it. I've learned an awful lot on my own, but maybe I've learned as much as I can, and now I've got to learn things with other people.

Johnson: *So what does that mean? Does that mean more workshops, talking with other writers, working with directors? Or a combination of all of that?*

Stearns: Right now, it means anything I can get my hands on. It means reading more plays. I've applied to be a reader for PUC. At the annual general meeting they elect people to do that every year. You have to read a certain number of plays each month. Immersing myself in as many opportunities as I can. Putting myself out a lot more than I have been. Picking people's brains. Taking advantage of what's available through all of the organizations that I'm associated with or that I belong to. Instead of throwing those envelopes that you get about this meeting or that meeting into the fire, I'll maybe think about going to them.

Johnson: *Is there any certain group that you need contact with? For example, people who have the same political sympathies or other women?*

Stearns: I sure know what I like in terms of the theatre; and I know what I like in terms of the direction style and the plays that theatres choose. There are some theatres that I'm just not interested in contacting because their mandate or their choice of plays just doesn't interest me. And that's okay. My choice of plays doesn't interest them. That's just fine. I started out in theatre at a grass roots, collective theatre level. And that's my history, and that's my first love. That's what got me really excited about being an actor.

Johnson: *I'm interested in that movement from collective creation, into writing collaboratively, into writing scripts as an individual. Can you tell me about that evolution?*

Stearns: ....Linda Griffiths and I are relatively the same age. We started out at relatively the same time. We met each other as young 19 year olds in Montreal. We're very similar in many ways: in terms of our background and our approach to life. We had some pretty good times together. She has come up in my life at certain very crucial times and said something or done something that has been very important to my life. She started working with 25th Street in Saskatoon. She kept writing me about this "collective" theatre. She was about 21. I was about 20. "Wow, it's a whole new thing," she wrote, "It's like fantastic. You get to develop your own characters. You get a lot more control over the situation. The directors are really loose. You get to tour and it's grass roots and it's real theatre and it's not this stuff that doesn't mean anything to people who come and drink cocktails and wear fancy dresses and just go to the theatre because it's trendy to do." So I started getting interested in it. And then, a year later she said, "Oh, I'm going back to Toronto, but there's another collective that's happening right now at 25th Street Theatre and I can't do it and I recommended you to Andy Tahn. Are you interested?" I'm in Vancouver, she's in Saskatoon. I say, "Oh yeah, I'm really interested." So Linda Griffiths got me started with 25th Street Theatre doing that first show.[1] That was a milestone for me. It was a change in direction for me.... I started to feel a lot more like an artist, and less like somebody was controlling my life: a director or a producer or a talent agent.

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Johnson: *As a woman, is it important for you to have control over the voice of a character? Did you ever feel limited as a performer by the roles available to women?*

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[1]The show Stearns refers to is Don'tcha Know With You and the North Wind in My Hair, produced in 1978 by 25th Street Theatre.

Stearns: Well. Gee, I was just so cocky. Those first years, working as an actress, I'd take anything I could get. I never had a real strong sense of myself as a feminist or as a woman or as anything. I never questioned any of that. I did question a lot of that when I got older, into my twenties, but I always felt that I could do what I wanted. I never felt stymied by being cast into a certain role. I've never felt it as a writer. As an actress, sometimes I bemoaned the fact that many plays are written with not very interesting female characters or not a lot of female characters. There's a lot more roles for men than there are for women. But as a writer, I find that I don't - Well, I don't sit down and say, "Okay, because I'm a woman, I want to write a play that has this many women in it and only this many men." I just go for what I think is the most important thing. I love to write male characters, just as much as I love to write female characters.

...

Johnson: *....Do you think your work holds special appeal for a Western audience? Who do you see as your audience?*

Stearns: I sure wish I had a better handle on that. I don't think about that enough. I really don't. I'm from the West. I was born and raised in the West, and I've lived most of my life in the West. So I suppose that's my inclination. I've never had a play produced east of Winnipeg. I've had workshops east of Winnipeg, but never a production....

I should really think a lot more about that. Because it's probably pretty important that I select my audiences while I'm writing. Maybe I do to a certain extent when I send my plays out to be read. I send them only to places that I think would be interested in them, but I do send them all over the country, from New Brunswick right down to Vancouver or Victoria. But I suppose I have much more of a Western sentiment, and that's probably what I want. Toronto's a great place. It's a wonderful place and there's some good theatre there, but a lot of theatre there is just good for there. They're really urban and intimate.

Okay. For example, Judith Thompson is a remarkable writer. She's a fantastic writer. She's got a great poetic sense about her, but what she chooses to write about is so different from what I choose to write about. Her whole approach and her ideas and her interest are miles and miles away from mine. But yet, she writes with such a sense of poetry and lyricism that I can really relate to her plays. I really like her writing. Although, gee, it would never occur to me to write about something like that. Or with her style. No, I suppose my sensibilities are rooted in the West. Definitely they are.

Johnson: How is your work rooted in the West?

Stearns: I'm probably a lot more interested and concerned and preoccupied with the environment than people who live in downtown Toronto. They're concerned with the environment in a much different way. They don't think about things like where the water goes, or where the water comes from, or where their garbage goes, or where their light source is coming from, whereas I think about that all the time because I see it. I'm out here where they're actually cutting trees down, and I'm out here where I can see the power plant. I can see the local garbage dump. I see what damage that dump is doing just a few miles down the road, and how it's leeching into the creek. I see it. We don't have plumbing in the house. We have an outhouse so I see where all of that goes. I see where our tap goes. I mean the water comes from the holding tank right there [She points], and from there it comes from the well up above further. So naturally my concerns are different. If they're spraying Vision herbicides up there, it's going to leech down into that well, and it's going to leech into my holding tank. You know, it's like I see it. I know it. I have a very different connection to it, whereas in the city, your preoc-

cupation is with things like Blue Boxes and recycling and reducing and consumerism and how you can put unleaded gasoline into your car.

Johnson: *In the city you become very removed from the whole process of how things get to you.*

Stearns: And everything that you see is human made. Practically. I mean you've got your planted trees and you've got your parks and you've got birds and bugs and things like that. That ersatz kind of environment gives you a whole other perspective on environmental crisis. Like, we have dogs and we have some horses. Or you know, there's a bear hanging around right now and I'm worried about him because I'm scared somebody's going to shoot him. You see deer all over the place. There's still wildlife out here. Hopefully it'll be around for a little while longer, although you saw coming up on the road, I'm sure, there's lots of development and it's fast. We've got a little bit of a dirt road left and that's about it. Although to you -

Johnson: *To me this is -*

Stearns: - this is really quite isolated. And it probably would have been to me even seven or eight years ago. It would have been really isolated to me too. But it gets relative. Your perspective changes really quickly.

Johnson: *Do you think the opportunities for you as a writer are different because you've chosen to stay out here?*

Stearns: I don't regret anything. And I really love where I live. I think I've given up some things, and I've gained some things in the long run. I know a lot of my friends say, "How can you live out there when you're not right by things that are going on all the time?" You miss out on so much if you're not right there. People forget about you. Out of sight, out of mind. That's true, you know. That's true to a certain extent with me, but I don't feel like it's been a loss to me at all. Not at all. It's been a different road. I'm still going in the same direction as many of my peers, but I've taken a different road, that's all....

Johnson: *Beverley Simons said that she needed to stay on the West Coast where she felt comfortable, even though the opportunities were limited. Do you have similar feelings about where you live?*

Stearns: You know, you don't have a perspective on it until it's happened or you've got years to look back on it. I was probably making choices without knowing I was making choices. I was making choices about coming out here, and living here, and getting away from the mainstream of things. Looking back, I can see seeds of that simmering in the background, way before I ever moved out here. I really do. From where I initially started to where I am now, God, there are so many right-angle turns it's amazing. But through all those right-angle turns a pattern has emerged. I often think it's like making choices on instinct. It's all on instinct. Because there's really no other place I'd rather be. I'm quite happy with the way things have gone and also with the direction things are going right now. It's not that far away. And it's not that difficult if I want more contact. In the last year that I've been trying to do that, it hasn't been that hard for me to get it. It really hasn't. It seems that I have been as successful as I have let myself be. Or the amount of energy that I have put into it has been the amount of success that I've gotten out of it. I really believe that.

Johnson: *You've done a lot of your work in Edmonton and in Winnipeg. Why haven't you worked in B.C.?*

Stearns: That's just starting now with The Western Canadian Theatre Company. I've done a little acting with them over the last couple of years, but that's just because it's been convenient and I've been available. But, yeah, I often think, "Wow, here I am living in British Columbia and I'm not working in this province." Well, a lot of it is because B.C. is really the dinosaur province in terms of individual funding for artists. I'm on this playwright recommender grant, [which] is just new. The government gave $5000 to a few different theatre companies in British Columbia to allot to playwrights to develop new scripts.

Johnson: *Do you get connected to a theatre?*

Stearns: It's always through a theatre company and you hope that that will lead to a production, of course. So this is the first time I've done that. I always got money through Alberta, because Alberta funded individual artists. Vancouver is where I'm from. I don't know - It's hard to go back to the place that you were born and raised in. I never developed any contacts there. I never worked there as an actress, except during that first year after high school. And now just in the last couple of years, I've started making connections with the New Play Centre. That's another place that's interested in developing *Hunter of Peace* further as a script. Right now that's on hold. We'll see what happens.

Yeah, I sent a copy of *Enemy Graces* to a couple of companies in Vancouver and didn't get any response from them. I had thought, "Oh, well, *Enemy Graces* would be a good show to be developed [there] because it's about B. C." I never got any response. I don't know why I've never been interested in Vancouver as a theatre scene. I've never put out any energy to get involved in it. The Prairies have always been the best place for me to work. They've been really good for me. Really generous and supportive.

PATRICIA LUDWICK trained as an actress at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in the late sixties. Her early professional work included stints at the larger, so-called "regional" theatres, including The Neptune Theatre, Theatre New Brunswick, The Stratford Festival, The Globe Theatre and Second Stage. In the mid-seventies, after becoming "disenchanted with established theatre" and "searching for ways to make theatre more alive, more direct, closer to the lifestream,[1]" Ludwick turned to Candian plays and collective creations. Notably, she was part of *Ten Lost Years* at TWP, and *The Donnelly Trilogy* and *Wacousta!* at NDWT. Ludwick moved to Vancouver in the late seventies, and worked as an actress before writing her first full-length play *Alone*, which was produced in 1983 by the New Play Centre. Since then, Ludwick has focused on her writing. Many of her stage plays attempt to cross the disciplines and incorporate dance and music with theatre. More often than not, her work has been produced in festival settings. Currently, she lives on Gabriolla Island, is developing a prose version of her play *Spinster*, and is "working my way out to the edge, to the fringes of the theatre."

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Street Level (Radio Monologues). PUC Compuscript, 1991.

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[1]Patricia Ludwick, "One Actor's Journey with James Reaney," Approaches to the Work of James Reaney, ed. Stan Dragland (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1983) 131.

Interview with **PATRICIA LUDWICK**, Friday, May 24, 1990

After a complicated morning of navigating ferry schedules, I interviewed Patricia Ludwick on Gabriolla Island, one of the Gulf Islands off Vancouver. As promised, Ludwick retrieved me from the dock in her eighth-hand car and we drove back along quiet dirt roads to the beachside cottage she had borrowed from a friend. The island is everything Vancouver is not: lush, quiet and slow. We ate soup and salad and bread and tea, sat in her living room, and admired the Pacific. The interview is punctuated by descriptions of the lighthouse, sightings of eagles on the beach, and brief trips to refill the teapot. Ludwick talked to me for at least two hours about how she had ended up on "the fringes" of both Canadian theatre and Canadian geography.

Lise Ann Johnson: *Where shall we begin?*

Patricia Ludwick: I feel happier talking about where I am and what I'm writing about. I find it so easy to get lost in complaints about what I don't like about the theatre. It's a depressing topic and I try to stay away from it. I have outworn whatever anger and rebellion and frustration I had with all of that and I've found my own way to keep doing what I'm doing. But I know that if I get started it'll be really depressing. [She laughs] I'd rather just start talking about where I came from and how I started to write and why I'm writing for the theatre. What I'm writing is easier for me to get excited about. In fact, for the moment, I'm writing prose.

Johnson: *What are you writing?*

Ludwick: It's an Explorations[1] project that's grown out of *Spinster*. There was so much material in that half-hour piece that I couldn't possibly fit in there and didn't want to, so I managed to get this grant which allows me to work with the composer. Debbie Boiko is making the audio version and Anne Anglin, who directed it in Toronto, is coming out to do drawings for it. I'm using a computer which I hope will allow me to explore the print medium, so that I can scan these drawings and manipulate them in a lot of different ways.

Johnson: *That sounds like a very freeing process.*

Ludwick: I was able to experiment for myself, not for the market, which is great. That is one of the big things about the festivals out here in the West, which are quite different from the festivals in the East. I really like this whole "artist as self-producer". My whole energy has always been that. If I didn't like what the other guys were doing, I'd start my own group and do it the way I wanted to. I'd rather fail on my own or with a group of friends than sit and complain. I think that's a very healthy state for the Arts to be in. If the artists gave up, we'd really be in trouble, because we're certainly not getting the stimulation or the reward or even just the recognition that makes it easy to continue. I have my reservations about endlessly self-producing, but I like the fact that actors and

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[1]The Explorations Program is a Canada Council programme which offers project grants in support of innovative approaches to artistic creation, new directions for artists and new developments in the arts.

directors are taking the power back to themselves and not waiting for somebody else to give them the power. Instead of hoping to be discovered.

Johnson: *They're using their energy in what they want to do?*

Ludwick: Mmhmm. All art is a gift anyway, so if I'm going to make it and give it away, I'd rather have the whole process at home. It gets very complicated as soon as it gets to the market place: eight pages of contracts in triplicate. It just gets - There are many, many difficulties and it seems to often prevent the creative energy from flowing.

Johnson: *Can you self-produce out here? What kinds of festivals are there?*

Ludwick: I made this *Spinster* piece for The Women in View Festival. I started the Women in View Festival. [She laughs] We started View a good three years before the first festival. Three or four of us were acting as advisers to a women writers' group.... At one point, Jane Heyman turned to Sue Astley and me and said, "Well, maybe we should do this more often. Maybe we should have a festival." Endless hassles later, we had a festival and it was very successful. Again, it was like: Okay, I can do anything I want for this. I don't have to think about whether the audience or the producer will be interested, because I know they will be. If I'm talking about the Sleeping Beauty story from the point of view of the spinster, I know there will be women interested. I can write this for myself, which really was a very freeing process. There were lots of men at the festival. It wasn't something that was exclusive of men, but I didn't have to think about how to include men first or how to sell it to a male producer as a good idea.

Johnson: *It must be very frustrating for someone to write a piece for herself, and then not find an audience to communicate it to.*

Ludwick: Yeah. The thing that I've been finding is - There's an eagle down there on the beach. Mmm. You can't see him now because he's landed. You'll see him later, they live all over here. - When I'm writing something to sell to the CBC for instance, I have to keep in mind the whole time what the show is and what the perimeters are and what their radio audience theoretically is, or what they've decided their radio audience is. I'm still writing what I want to write, but I'm having to disguise it and kind of channel it here and there so that maybe they won't quite notice that I'm really talking here about totally mystical ideas, instead of just talking about what I'm talking about.

Johnson: *So it's a matter of not having to disguise it? I think that was the idea behind the Edmonton Fringe: artists can do whatever they want. An audience member can go to one show and hate it, but they don't care because they'll probably love the next show. However, now it's become so successful I'm not sure that's happening.*

Ludwick: I've certainly noticed the change and I've heard other people say that too. It's happened in the Vancouver one as well. You have to produce it yourself, and after a certain number of years of asking your friends to work for you for nothing, I start going, "Oh, gosh, I really can't do this, I've got to pay everybody at least a little bit." But then it becomes a real risky proposition. You put out a lot of money to the Fringe producers to get a venue, and you do all your own publicity, and you compete with all those other people. So it goes back to the market economy, and if it's got sex in the title and a lot of silly jokes, it's more likely to get people in. Or at least that's the theory. Certainly I've heard audience members at the Vancouver Fringe bemoaning the fact that there seemed to be an awful lot of light weight stuff and very little with much substance. Not that it isn't good to have lots of just off the wall crazy stuff too. That's a wonderful place for it.

Johnson: *It's part of the festival.*

Ludwick: Yeah. I don't have the time and money to go see theatre all the time, so the festivals are wonderful. I'll go and binge out for a day or two or however long my energy lasts, and feel that I've got back in touch with a variety of things that have been going on. And as you say, they're short, and if I don't like this one, I can race off and see another one and maybe I'll like that better.

I've noticed that the regular theatre community bemoan the fact that people go to festivals and then don't buy season tickets. I think maybe they're missing the point here. Maybe our style of life has changed. Maybe we need more festivals and fewer seasons of plays that people have to buy ahead of time....

Certainly when I was performing, the regular season ticket holders were a lot less interesting to play to than the Sunday afternoon "pay what you can" audiences that came in for a quarter. They were right there: "Oh, great, whatever it is, it didn't cost me very much, except for standing for two hours to get in." They're much more open to: "What have you got? Am I going to like it or not?" They're much more vocal about whether they liked it or not. They're not so polite. So I feel that for the health - the financial health as well as the creative health - of the Arts, for goodness sakes, start mixing those people up. Don't keep dividing it all off into the staid people with a lot of money and some interest. Most people who buy a subscription season to the Arts Club Theatre are back at the symphony the next season just to give themselves different options in the Arts. So all of the Arts are competing for the same few people, instead of mixing up a few barefoot, rowdy teenagers in with those opera audiences. If you do that you're probably going to make the whole experience feel different. It'll have more "edges".

Johnson: *With a uniform audience you end up establishing a kind of yardstick of what is "good" theatre. It's nice to mix up audiences that have different perspectives on what is interesting and entertaining, so that one concept of "good" doesn't -*

Ludwick: Yes, exactly. So that you've got some people in the audience booing and some of them throwing roses. That would be great. When I was in Vancouver as an actor, boy, it was pretty moribund. This would be at least ten years ago, when I moved back there. Not very much interesting or exciting was happening. I really got to the point where I thought, "Oh, boy, everybody must have left town, maybe they all went to Edmonton, I don't know. What's happening? Where are the young people with all the rebellious new ideas?" And when they announced that first Fringe Festival, out of the woodwork came sixty groups. Sixty the first time! And we got sixty applications to the Women in View Festival too for the first one. The second one was a hundred and twenty or something. People are there, they just haven't had the opportunity.

I think that's very much true for women's work. When I was working with the New Play Centre, they started a new program called ShortTakes.... Pamela Hawthorne decided one year to have it for women writers. And again, they got - I can't remember how many it was now - but it was around 50 or 60 submissions, of which I think they only did about six - whereas normally, out of say 300 plays that are submitted in a year to the New Play Centre for evaluation of one sort or another, only a quarter at the most would have been written by women. So it wasn't that there weren't women out there.

Of course, one theorizes endlessly about why women weren't submitting. I think there are two aspects to that. One is that women very often seem to think that what they have written is not good enough yet and that they should work more on it, whereas men seem to have much more elan about it: "I'll just throw it out and see what happens." I would see scripts that weren't even typed or the typing errors weren't even corrected. I'd never send something out that looked like that. Somebody obviously just

bashed something out on a typewriter and threw it in an envelope and sent it off. Whereas the women seem to have a lower self-esteem about their work and the value of it. The other aspect is that they didn't think there was a market for it. So why write a play? Quite a few of those women wrote the play for that contest. I did too. I put one in, and it was done [*Trip the Light Fantastic*]. I'd had it in my head to write and I probably would have written it without that, but it gave me a place to put it and to be able to experiment with this idea of using dancers and actors without spending three years of my life trying to see if it will work and then finding out that it doesn't.

I think when the call went out to women that there was somebody interested in things that women would write - and a lot of them did have content that was particular to women's relationships - they thought there was somebody there who would be at least willing to read it. And I think that's what the Women in View Festival is doing too. It says, "Yes, here's a place. We do want whatever you're interested in writing." That was very much the principle that we set up: any content, any style, any gender of performers, and any age. But the project must be initiated by a woman. For instance, this past year, they had Leena [DeGuevera], [of] Puente Theatre from Victoria. She's from Chile and the first year, she had done a play with Latin American immigrant women called *I Wasn't Born Here*. It was just beautiful.... And then this year, she did one with all men. It was about Latin American men's experience, and there it was in the Women's Festival. But it was Leena's project. Women, of course, have interests that are extremely wide-ranging.

Johnson: *To say that a project with a group of male performers somehow doesn't belong in the Women in View Festival would be incredibly limiting. If you offer a space that says, "we want whatever you're doing," it has an inviting atmosphere.*

Ludwick: It's also inviting to the audience. It's for whoever wanted to come, and fortunately, there are a lot of men who have been interested to come and see what's going on, and who have been very supportive of the idea of having a woman's festival.

Johnson: *After the View Festival, you took* Spinster *to Toronto. Where did it play?*

Ludwick: At the Groundswell Festival, which is Nightwood's festival for new works or works-in-progress, which is what mine was at that point.

Johnson: *Why did you want to perform it yourself?*

Ludwick: The reason to write it and perform it myself was to have the most direct route between the mind of the author and the mind of the audience. I wanted to know what happens if I don't go through the metaphor of "here are actors acting out a story that is separate from me the writer". It really was about the mind to the mind.

Johnson: *How has your perspective of communicating to the audience changed as a writer?*

Ludwick: I think, because I was a performer, my writing is still very much influenced by that communication. I like live theatre because it's live. There's two-way communication back and forth.... That's what I'm interested in: communication. I also have discovered over the years, that I don't really like black boxes. I never was very fond of proscenium arches. Here I was standing up in front of people, pretending to be somebody I'm not, while a bunch of people sit in the dark and pretend they're not there. It's a very peculiar sort of thing to do....

Theatre in the round interested me right from the beginning.... The circle is very female and it's also the oldest form of theatre. People sat around campfires and told

stories and danced. It gives you a completely different relationship. A completely different relationship! And the interesting thing was that in both the Women in View and the Nightwood festivals, I had to fight to do it in the round. I finally got it [at the View Festival], but the technical director was just up the wall: "Well, we can't possibly do that because we'll have to move all the chairs back for the next thing." And I said, "Well, I'll move them myself. We don't need any lights, we don't need any sound, we don't need any anything. You can go away. We'll do this and it won't be hard." In fact, it wasn't hard. There was a little stage in the room that we were performing in, but we put some seats on the stage and created a circle. The point of doing *Spinster* was to be on exactly the same level and on the same kind of chair and in the midst of the story teller. We are all the same human beings....

After View, I took *Spinster* to Toronto in November. I had been writing to them since February explaining that all I needed was a circle of chairs. I didn't need anything else, but I needed this circle of chairs. Eventually, I never got it. At a women's festival, I never got the circle! We were doing it in a room that could have easily accommodated a circle, but it had a stage in it that took up most of the space and had quite a steep rake. Not extremely steep, but too steep to put chairs and tables on it. They had it step up as a cabaret, so you had tables and chairs to move. I fought and fought, and finally got them to give me a couple of aisles in the audience so that I could move amongst them. But then the second night that we performed it, they were so oversold that they had blocked up all the aisles and we had to completely change everything. I don't think they ever understood why it was so significant that even at a women's festival, when all I wanted was a circle, I couldn't get one. That's part of what I wanted to set up as my relationship to the audience. Not that there are some people up there who are magical beings - stars; and we are down here - humble, pedestrian, unexpert, not human.

...

Johnson: *For you, what are some of the problems involved in working within the regular theatre community?*

Ludwick: We're seeing shorter and shorter rehearsal periods. In Vancouver, Bill Millard at the Arts Club has been doing it for years: two week rehearsals. Now they're doing it at the New Play Centre. For a brand new script!

Johnson: *Two weeks? That's awful.*

Ludwick: And that includes previews. I think it's just criminal. It puts huge pressure on the actors to come up with something, with anything, because they do not want to bore an audience, nor do they want to look bad. So you get superficial treatment on all levels. Directors seem to be content as long as they can put a stamp on it. As long as it can look very dramatic in some way, so it looks like that's his style or her style or whatever. To me, everybody is undernourishing their own creativity and really underestimating the audience. They're making the assumption that an audience only has a superficial understanding, which is a real cheat.

When you look at the difference between the way things are developed in Europe, and the way they are in North America, no wonder we have very different kinds of products. And therefore we have a different audience, because they haven't seen plays with more substance. They're not going to assume that that's what theatre can do. My feeling is that unless the artists and the people in the arts community are willing to stick their neck out for something that's worth giving the audience, how are they going to expect an audience to be there for them? So it's good that we do have things like festivals....

Theatre is too difficult a thing to do, to just - [sighs] not to do genuinely, I guess. It's not that I object to humour or lightness or joy. All of those things are perfectly possible, but to trivialize the human condition seems to me, aaww, just so sad. It makes me feel sad. I find I get very sad going to the theatre. I feel kind of like, "Oh gosh, there were all those people with all that talent and they did that."

Every once in a while I go to a concert. I remember once in Halifax going to see the Chieftains. Well, the audience was in the theatre an hour before, and banging at the doors to get into the auditorium: "We can't wait, we can't wait, we can't wait." And then they'd get in there and start stomping with their feet: "Start, come out, come out." And then I think of plays and how the audience hangs out until the last second in the lobby, going: "Oh, can I get another drink before I have to go in there and sit down and be tortured?" And I thought, "We must be doing something wrong." So, I would like to have that feeling. I would love to sense that people felt like whatever we're going to go in there and see, it's going to make us feel way much better about being alive and being human beings, and being who we are and where we are: the possibilities. If that sounds Pollyanna, too bad!

Johnson: *I don't think it sounds Pollyanna at all.*

Ludwick: When I performed Spinster, I discovered that that was part of the difference between the audience in Toronto and the audience in Vancouver. It had been a long time since I had performed in Toronto, and I had never performed my own work there. I had forgotten the difference in audiences. So even though this was a woman's festival and very informal, with people sitting around drinking beer, in fact the audience was much more stiff. I realized right away: "Oh I see, right, they want edge here, okay, edge." Whereas the Vancouver audience was just relaxed and open -interested or not interested, I don't mean that everybody loved the show, but I was speaking back and forth to people who were willing to say, "Let's see what will happen here." Whereas with the Toronto audience it was like, "Okay, you're going to make me work hard, are you?" It was very, very different. They're quite happy to laugh, but they don't want to be vulnerable. Which is what *Spinster* asks people to be, in public....

I remember feeling the same when I lived in Toronto. I had been down in Nova Scotia for the summer, and we'd gone up to Halifax to see something that was coming through town. It was something from England coming with some sort of Greek play. I went and we had a great time. I didn't particularly think it was wonderful, but it was like, "Oh, isn't this interesting and different, we haven't seen anything like this for a long time." So we were positively reacting to and were open to what the experience was. I found myself only a few weeks later in Toronto, sitting in a theatre, and sitting back in my seat like this, with my arms folded: "Okay you guys, so, I paid my ten bucks, now what, what are you going to do, prove it to me that you've got something here."

What happened to me this time, was that I noticed how hard it is to live in Toronto. How hard it is to get around, to go and pick up a gong from one place and get it across town to another, and to make arrangements to meet all these other people to do these very simple transactions really. But everything was hard to do and we all had our little lists and our agendas for the day. We were barreling with full energy to get through, just to keep all of this together. So when I met somebody head on, who had another agenda that wasn't going to work with mine, we were both like, "How dare you, you can't say no," instead of going, "Oh right, okay, well maybe we can-" I mean, you can't drink the water. You can barely breathe the air. The subway was on "go-slow". Everything was hard to do. So I found myself changing. And my energy changing. No wonder the audience's energy is different than it is in Vancouver.... And of course now, living on Gabriolla, going to Vancouver seems way too fast. Traffic, too much traffic.

...

Johnson: *I was speaking with Peggy Thompson about Vancouver audiences being different from Toronto audiences, and she pointed to* Alone *as a play that was incredibly successful for a Vancouver audience. What made it work for audiences here?*

Ludwick: I don't know. It actually worked really well in Thunder Bay, too. The people in Thunder Bay were really taken with it....

I did a workshop of it in Toronto.... It was a great workshop from my point of view and from a play development point of view, but then it had this bloody Toronto audience. Again, it was like Urjo Kareda: producers. That was the difference with the Nightwood Festival: it was a festival from the producer's point of view, not from the artist's point of view. There were artists there who were looking for a producer: "Who's going to buy my script? Where is my profile?" There was that whole sense of: "I'm here for my career." I was there to give my friends in Toronto a chance to see this different way of working that I'd come up with. It didn't occur to me to use it as a step in a career to somewhere else. This is what it is, it's a festival piece. It was meant to be a festival piece. So let's put it on here for these people who happen to be here.

People thought it was too West Coast. Now, I find that very peculiar. Yes, it's set on the West Coast, of course, but contact improv is hardly new, and the script is hardly wildly experimental. I mean, the form of dialogue was all pretty naturalistic. So I don't know. I definitely got the feeling that it was a little too flaky, a little too weird and far-out. It does sit on an edge of pretentiousness, of a kind of poetical self-consciousness, which is in the original diary, too. And I did try to cut that edge a lot. I wanted to use her words and let her flavour come through, but cut them to the bones so that it wasn't flowery. The original writer was of her time and was pretty flowery and sentimental. That's in there, although I think that the impact of the physical movement cut that for the audience....

I'm also not particularly good at marketing. I really just loathe the whole thing, so I never really pushed the play. Each time that someone picked it up, [they] knew about it from somebody else or knew me or heard about it from somebody that wanted to do it....

So I don't know. There are many reasons why *Alone* possibly didn't appeal to the Toronto audience. Students did it at St. Catharines as a little project once, so I don't think it's just that the story appeals to Western people and not to Easterners. They have to translate a lot more. Thunder Bay is near the bush, so the people there certainly had an identification with that kind of existence, although it would be a very different one in that woods.

Johnson: *How did you develop that script?*

Ludwick: That was a classic one. It was sort of like: "Lesson in Play Development in the 1980's". It took me about four years after I'd found the story. I wrote a version first for radio, which was never produced, but it was a very good way to make me condense down the story into the elements.

Then I wrote a version that was really for just one voice. Jane Heyman - who has been a friend of mine for nearly thirty years since our days at university at UBC together - She, bless her heart, got a reading for me at the New Play Centre....

After that, I went to the Banff Playwriting Colony. I think it happened really because Sharon Pollock was still up there. She wasn't around, but she was concerned because there either weren't any women or there were very few women that they had found. So Larry Lillo was working up there and he got the script and said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, this is great. Okay, bring Patsy up here." So we did, and that was a wonderful

experience for me. I did the second version there, and got a chance to play with some of the physical ideas.

After Banff, I had Larry and Jane and Judith Coltie working on it for three days. This was through the New Play Centre again, and out of that, I wrote a whole new version without reference at all to the earlier ones. The New Play Centre was still having public play readings at that time, so it got some audience feedback at that stage. It was out of that public reading that Larry had said, "This sounds like contact improv."

Then I got a grant to go to the Toronto Theatre Festival and take contact improv workshops from a group from San Francisco. That started me on a whole new version....

It must have been the next year that the New Play Centre expanded the perimeters of their new play festival. At that point I was on a three month artist-in-residence with them. They sort of thought, "Oh God, we should do Patsy's play." So I got ten half-days of rehearsal to teach actors contact improv and put it together! It was a festival, so there was no budget for much of anything.... It turned out to be the hit of the festival, partly because it was the most non-naturalistic thing at the festival that year. I think people were dying to see something that didn't have kitchen sinks.

...

Johnson: *Do you find workshopping and play development useful?*

Ludwick: Because I come out of the theatre myself, I know how to use workshops. I think it's not always very useful to somebody who comes from a writing background. Again, very often the producer mentality is governing the workshop process. The theatre wants to guarantee their product, so they want the writer to do a workshop, and they want to do it their way. So they have people sit around and discuss it *ad nauseam*, which can be a really destructive, terrible process. It isolates the writer from this group of people who all know how to talk to each other and all have a common language and common understandings, but don't necessarily understand what it's like to write, and how hard it is, and what might be possibly embryonic in this writing. They've read it once. So, I absolutely understand why there are some authors who refuse to have anything to do with workshops. If theatres are going to do workshops, especially places that are theoretically play development centres, they should literally have a playwright's advocate who makes sure that the playwright has somebody guiding them through this process and telling them when to say, "No, I don't want a workshop even though you want to put up a play reading next week. I'm not ready for that and that would be bad for me. If I put it up now and got a lot of bad comments it would stop me ever writing it." I'm sure that's happened, and I think it happens to women even more, because they're just that much more vulnerable. They have less of a thick skin. Not all women, of course. But I've been through that process as an actor and I know how much new plays keep changing and how audiences can say bullshit things. God, I've been through so many audience discussions as an actor listening to somebody spout off about what's wrong with this play and going, "No, I've heard it before and you're wrong." But I've been through that, so I can balance it.

I know that it's really valuable to hear my work read aloud. You know right away, once you've heard it aloud, if something's too long or too complex. For my kind of work, it's also important to be able to get right in there and work physically with the actors myself, not to try and talk to a director. There is this whole etiquette that has been set up around a hierarchical theatre system where directors are God. Writers are never allowed to speak to actors, that would be subversive. What are we doing here? Something's wrong when the playwright is not wanted at rehearsals. That's right in the contract negotiations. They've been fighting to ensure that a playwright have the right to come to rehearsals. I mean, we have to put this in a contract? Something's wrong.

...

Johnson: *Do you prefer working with women directors?*

Ludwick: When I moved to Vancouver, I'd been in the professional theatre ten years and I realized that I'd never had a woman director. Ever. In Vancouver there were a lot more women directors, and the huge difference for me was the dynamic. If I had an idea as an actor in rehearsal, it was just an idea with a woman director. It was an idea: "Okay, let's try it, if it's good, fine, if it's not, we'll throw it out." But it wasn't a threat to somebody's authority. I'd had a whole lot of difficult encounters with directors. I thought it was me. I must be a difficult person..... I had never realized how much that still is pervasive. Now it's not all men. Larry Lillo is a wonderful director to work with. He has none of that at all. There are others too, but for me, the women I was working for considered me an equal or considered me equally valuable in some way.

...

Johnson: *Do you prefer to have women direct your writing?*

Ludwick: I am very glad that I have had women directors direct my pieces because I think they have had an understanding of it that would be different than a man's. For instance, when *Alone* was done in Thunder Bay, Svetlana Zylin directed it. I was very impressed with her respect for the script. She accepted it as it was, but really went into it and looked at layers and depths of it and didn't ask me, "Well, couldn't I rewrite something?"

The designer was a man who wasn't there for rehearsals. He had sent his designs in from Victoria. He had designed the whole set on a series of rakes. There were all these uneven angles with a hole at centre stage that had a ten foot drop! The actors were learning to do contact improvisation, and had to do it on all these extraordinary angles. I was just appalled. They asked him to change it and he wouldn't. He would not give it up. He wouldn't give his design up. Eventually when I saw the whole thing, I realized he'd based the whole visual concept of the play on the man's dream.... He read it genuinely as an artist and that was genuinely his emotional connection, but it was male! Naturally. So I'm very glad I've worked with women whose sensibilities were somewhat closer to mine....

Women's work is so different. Not always, but often it is so different. Partly, I think it is a movement towards intimacy, or an ecstasy. That's the movement that my work has. It's not based on conflict, it's based on this movement towards very, very intimate exchange.... It's not just wallowing in emotion or something. It has a movement and it goes somewhere and it has a need and a drive, but it goes to a place that might not necessarily be, for a man, satisfactory. It might not end where the man would end it.

Johnson: *There are different ways to end a story.*

Ludwick: Different ways to tell it, too. Certainly a lot of my work contains domestic details because they're in my life and they are intimately connected with how I live. In fact, I write at home. I know some people really enjoy that sense of leaving home and going to a place of work. I can understand that to a degree, but I also find great value in writing at home. If I get stuck, I wash the dishes, or I vacuum, or I sweep the deck, or I garden and it is all part of the writing process. All of that affects me completely, which is why the place affects me too. Living here on Gabriolla has made me feel so much more at ease with who I am and how I live and the people around me and the way I re-

late to the world, that naturally my writing changes. It's easier for me to write here because it's easier for me to be alive.

The process of learning to write had a lot to do with overcoming the censor in my own head. A lot of women admit that this is their major problem. Men may have this problem too and are more reluctant to talk about it. They've maybe been socially conditioned to not admit mistakes or difficulties. You brazen it out as if it's all perfectly okay and you're on top of everything all the time, whereas women are usually trading stories about how incompetent they feel. There's always that voice that says, "This isn't good enough, this is crummy and whatever made you think you could be a writer anyway?" It just gets in the way, so the process of writing has a lot to do with clearing my mind of all of that kind of garbage that doesn't help it....

Johnson: *What is* Spinster *about for you?*

Ludwick: I think in *Spinster* I'm trying to explore the idea that a spinster has value. The fact that a woman is single does not mean that she is not in relationship to the rest of the universe. She's just not in relationship to one other single human being. That is part of how I relate to the world. It shapes me differently. My work is part of that too. The work I do as a writer is real work, as much as the waitress work or the typing work that I may have to do in between being able to afford to write. It's not valued as work in our society. It's somehow assumed that it would be simple to do....

I keep trying to get the voice closer and closer to me. I'm weaving it closer to my actual reality without wanting to write just autobiography. There's not a whole lot to interest people in all this stuff that I'm going on to you about now, about my personal life. [She laughs] A book about me explaining how I'm a writer and how I'm a spinster and how I have friends here and there: I don't know whether I could make that very interesting. I thought about writing an autobiography at one point. There's a lot of funny stories about me as an actor. Anybody in the theatre has funny stories to tell. People outside of the writing community always say, "Oh, you should write a book!" I always go, "You write the book." Eventually I feel like maybe that's somewhere down the line. To look at theatre from that kind of distance.

As I've said to people before - this may spoil your thesis here - I have worked my way down in Canadian theatre, because when I first started working, the only theatres that paid you money were the regional theatres. I got quickly disillusioned with that and started forming small companies. Smaller and smaller and smaller; these little companies traveling all over Canada doing these little Canadian plays to little tiny audiences in little tiny places. And now I'm working my way out to the edge, to the fringes of the theatre.

Johnson: *You can't get any further out that way.*

Ludwick: I could take off in a boat or something. Off the West Coast. I'd love to do pageant plays in canoes.... Now I am also working my way outside of theatre buildings. The buildings are restricting how I want to communicate with people. Originally, I wanted to do *Spinster* in the courtyard at the Firehall. The View Festival was originally meant to be a summer festival. I think it works much better in the winter, because people want a festival at that time. There are too many festivals in the summer. But I would really like to do it in a non-theatre space.

Johnson: *Certainly theatre buildings limit who your audience is.*

Ludwick: And how you can relate to them. Even if you try and turn it upside down: you put the audience on the stage and use the auditorium or something. It's still restricting. I really hate black boxes.

Johnson: *It also ends up being a space that's "owned" by theatre people. If you take a piece to the audience's space, that sets up a different dynamic. You can be "the guest" for a change.*

Ludwick: There was a lovely theatre company in Toronto in the early 70's, that Paul Battis ran called Theatre Second Floor. It was in an old warehouse, way down below Queen Street, in a crummy area. It was like his living room. He was like some kind of vaguely hippy friend. He would be in the lobby sweeping it up when you came and he'd be chatting away. You kind of lolled around in this place on bits of old sofa and furniture and whatever they could put together. It was simply an atmosphere, and obviously the attitude of the people who set it up was deliberate. I felt completely at ease as soon as I went, although I remember noticing certain people, Urjo Kareda for one, who was a critic at the time. You could tell he was extremely uncomfortable in his seat and didn't quite know where to look or where to put himself.

Johnson: *I suppose that can backfire. If you're used to having a certain place in the theatre-*

Ludwick: But goodness knows there's lots of spaces for those people who want to go to those big theatres and sit in the dark. There's lots of room for them to do that. Where there isn't a lot of room is places for us to redefine what the communication is.

Certainly it happened a lot in the early seventies in that big movement of finally doing Canadian plays because we were forced into converted warehouses and garages and whatnot. But again, as each space got a little bit more money, it got a little bit more rigid. The old Toronto Free Theatre, every time you went to see a play, the whole space was completely different: where the audience was, where they put the set. And it was free in those days. It was packed. It was always packed. And it was totally free. Now it costs $25. And it has rigid seating, so every play you see, is in this space because it gets too expensive to do it, or something happens. They want to squeeze in more seats because there's this pressure from the granting people that you've got to prove you've got more percentage of box office money. It's an endless circle. This whole vicious kind of thing: we have to prove our worth in monetary terms.

I've watched so many good people, especially in the administrative end of theatre, who are earning ridiculously low money compared to other administrators in other businesses, going slowly crazy after ten years of fighting the same battles over and over again. All it's done is got worse. The accent of our whole society has turned to the right: all the privatization of government kinds of things; this whole business of getting more corporate sponsorships. It is all censoring. Even though a corporation may not directly censor. You have to then go, "Okay, to get that we have to make a season that will do this kind of thing and will appeal on these number of levels, and we have to have a theatre with comfortable seats and a bar, because otherwise when the board members come they're going to be appalled at what they're supporting." It's not as simple as the dollars. It's just great vicious circles. Which is why, as I say, here I am out on the fringes and going, "Okay, well let's try prose. And see what happens there."

Self-publishing is so much easier now. Computers allow you to do that. I realize that the whole publishing industry also is equally fraught. Which of course is this whole thing about plays: the only ones that are eligible for the Governor General's award, which is the only big money award, are published ones. So maybe half a dozen or ten plays out of say the fifty new plays that might be produced across the country are the ones that are eligible. John Krizanc, bless his heart, who is very sweet, the year that he won for *Prague*, he actually made some press releases and made some noise about that. But apparently the man who runs that section of the Canada Council is absolutely adamant that it isn't literature unless it's in a book. Which is really backwards to what

the art is. Shakespeare was still Shakespeare before the folios were printed. However, the nice thing about the Governor General's awards for Drama is that it's almost all women that have won. That's a very nice boost.

Johnson: *Would it be helpful to have more publishing houses publishing women's plays?*

Ludwick: Yes. I can understand why they don't. It's difficult to distribute them....

Johnson: *How do you compensate for the lack of publishing opportunities?*

Ludwick: Then it's back to word of mouth. It's still a small enough country that word of mouth works fairly well. But except for those few writers that hit that nice - I don't mean to denigrate their writing, but some writers are writing a genre that's good for the regionals and the alternate regionals, so that half a dozen companies will actually do their play. That means you could actually make some money off a play. I make more money off a half-hour radio script than I do off of something I may have spent three or four years writing for the theatre. You have to want to do it to keep on.

But more publishing would certainly help. Certainly I want to see more work from New Zealand and Australia. I know that we have so many things in common in our background and I'm sure that they would be interested in some of the things that are bred here. It isn't just England that is the other market. Nor is it the States. Everybody seems to think that somehow or another, if we get free trade we will all be fine. Although some people have done very well. George Walker's plays have been done a lot. And I think some of Sharon Pollock's writing and Anne Chislett's writing are definitely of the mainstream, well-made playscripts that have a good market. And they are published and undoubtedly they get studied more and done more than some of these fringe little things that I write. I just had somebody write and say that they want to act as my exclusive agent. [She laughs] I went, "No way, I don't think so."

Johnson: *In writing prose, you eliminate all the people that interpret you work for the audience; like the producer and the director and the actor. Do you have a more direct link to your audience in writing prose, especially if you self-publish?*

Ludwick: I don't know. For me, it just seemed like a really logical extension. I wanted to find out how you communicated that way. At least it feels like it's more direct. There is a piece of paper between me and the audience and the audience is unknown, but for me, it was logical to want to figure out how that would work because I love to read and always have. Books are great wonderful places for the imagination. But it is also because there's less and less space for me in the theatre as it is at the moment. There are these festivals and women's organizations which have opened up spaces which certainly weren't there twenty years ago when I started in the theatre. There weren't even spaces for Canadian plays. But at this point, I really don't like asking my friends to work for insanely small amounts of money.

It's an enormous amount of work to even produce *Spinster*, which is minimal. The amount of paperwork, phone calls, xeroxing, hiring studios, finding this instrument or that costume piece, goes forever. With the kind of work that I'm writing, which is not tits and teeth and song and dance, I can't guarantee that I could make money self-producing in little festivals. I think people would enjoy it in a festival. I know they'd enjoy it in a festival situation. I had seriously considered trying to get it into the Edmonton Fringe for this year. I looked into it and started pricing out airline tickets. I'd have to bring one other person, just to give me an outside eye. It was too much of a gamble. If it got put into a small house and the word didn't go out in the first three days that this was one of the ones not to miss, I would lose money that I don't have. At my age -

Certainly I spent all my twenties doing that, living on the edge and we were all young and we were all full of energy, taking the risks and getting by on $35 a week. Taking chances was part of the process. It was good.... It helps you understand the whole process from a lot of different points of view, including how important publicity is. I don't mind a bit going on and talking endlessly on radio programs or to local reporters who don't really know what you're talking about. Anything to get the word out. Although I'm really tired of putting up posters, asking permission to put them in shops. You know, how long do I keep doing that? Is it worth it? Do I get enough back? You know, mental and spiritual food from doing this kind of work? And at this point I don't.

I don't foresee not ever doing that again. I will continue to do that. Maybe things are evolving again. Maybe I'll start finding other groups of people, so that we could form self-producing co-operatives. So that you have a number of things at your disposal that you can all share. Not necessarily personnel or a building, which almost always restricts. Theatre companies that I've been involved with, every time we got a theatre building, the money started going into the theatre building instead of the work. We were tied down to fundraising and renovations and all of that stuff. But it would be good to share some of the ways and means and the just plain leg work. So that if there were a bunch of people that wanted to go to the Edmonton Fringe from the West Coast, we could get together and say, "Okay, if we rent a bus, we can get all of our stuff in it."

Johnson: *Do you think that's one of the directions that we need to move in?*

Ludwick: It's one of the possible directions. Absolutely. That's part of what an organization like View is really good for. It lets everybody know what information is out there. Here on Gabriolla and in Nanaimo, there's some wonderful women writing, but a lot them haven't lived in other parts of Canada, so they don't have the confidence that what they are doing, yes, is worthwhile and that self-publishing is not a bad word. It is not vanity press anymore. If you have something that you want to do, here's a way we can do it. We can all do it together. There's not a secret about how to get a Canada Council grant: "Here, I'll tell you about it. I know all about this end of it. This is what you need to do to get one of those grants." Part of the reason women get fewer grants is the same reason they get produced less in theatres: they submit less. They keep thinking, "Oh well, I couldn't possibly be eligible, I'm not good enough, I haven't had enough books published." Or something. And all I know is that, "Oh you just go through this and, so you produced this play yourself up in Whitehorse and it was a big success. So it was amateur. So what? You produced it. It's been produced. You're a produced playwright. Because this is an equivalent of a professional production." But it's not a secret. It's important to have been around and talked to a few people who know it from a lot of the ins and outs and ups and downs.

What happens in Toronto is that they forget that the rest of the country exists. Or that anything interesting could be possibly going on any further away than Mississauga. But everybody else in the country knows that there are interesting things going on everywhere else. In Newfoundland and Antigonish. And the Prairies, to me, are the real epitome of that. The playwrights have all got their own organizations that they set up for their own purposes. Not like the New Play Centre. It's set up by directors and producers, theoretically for the playwrights, but serving the directors' and producers' needs first. Certainly I have been helped by them, but it makes a big difference.

The Prairie Provinces seem to have a better mentality. Maybe it's the old tradition of the farmer and the co-operative that has helped towards that mentality. And feeling isolated. I remember being in Saskatchewan and the writers talking about how they had these writers groups because they didn't see a writer for months on end, so they would deliberately drive 200 miles once a month to get together with other writers. They started having much more of a feeling of support amongst each other.

I find that's happening in women's groups. Here on Gabriolla, there are men writers who have been asking us, "Well how come we can't come?" And we say, "Form your own group, and then we can all get together. Once every so many meetings we'll all join together, but there are things we need to be able to feel safe about doing." And they all think, "Oh yeah, that's a good idea," but never do it. I think that as the men's consciousness-raising increases, we'll all be better off. I'm not a woman's separatist in the sense of feeling that that's the end product. And that was very much the aim of View: "Wouldn't it be nice if we made ourselves redundant in 10 years, so that we didn't have to have a woman's festival, so that women's art was visible everywhere?"

This women's writing group has been absolutely fascinating. A lot of it is just sharing the concerns of women. It gives them a place where they feel safe to bring that first little thing out. The quality of writing is often very high. It doesn't necessarily fit into: "This is a short story in a collection or this is a poem in a sequence or this is full-length play." These are little explorings of small moments. Beautifully done though. Beautifully done. I have a feeling that there would be a lot more women's stuff if women felt more confident about really short forms. That it is a genuine form, not a cheat. Not: "It's not a real story because it isn't long enough."

Johnson: *I agree. The expectation that it has to fit into some form that we already have is so limiting: "I can't send it in because it's not done." But maybe it is done? Or maybe we shouldn't use that word?*

Ludwick: Yeah, it's complete in itself. It could be part of more, or it can just be there. Be the space and size that it wants to be. I have heard it voiced that because so many women have families and children that demand their time, short forms can encompass that. To try and think of writing a novel which might take two years, in the time between nine when the kids go to school and two-thirty when they're back is just daunting. Wallace Stevens, I think it was him, was a doctor, and apparently he wrote little poems because he had a prescription pad on his office desk all the time. So when he had a few minutes, he'd write little "prescriptions". That's what he had time for. That's what he had the space in his life for. And that was valid....

Johnson: *It's an illusion to think that somehow what you are at home and what you are when you work are totally separate things.*

Ludwick: Which is why I started out talking to you today about how I never felt like I had a career. In fact I didn't really want to have a career. Because it felt as if a career was a mould, a place, an image: a writer, an actor. I had a lot of trouble with the actress label. I didn't know what people imagined an actress was, but I knew that most of the time they didn't imagine that you actually worked quite hard doing it, and got dirty and grubby and things like that. They seem to have a more loose idea of what "writer" might be. Kind of soft-cooked around the edges instead of a nice clear stamp. The whole thing for me is that I am a human being. Not necessarily "doing" at all times, the "doing" is a product of my "being". And that's what I'm here to do: journey through being human and express it in whatever ways.